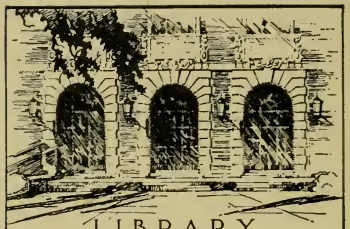

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WHITELADIES.

VOL. II.

WHITELADIES

By Mrs. OLIPHANT

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WHITELADIES.

CHAPTER I.

AFTER affairs had come to the point described in our last chapter, when Miss Susan had committed herself openly to her scheme for the discomfiture of Farrel-Austin, and that personage had accepted, with a bitterness I cannot describe, the curious *contretemps* (as he thought) which thus thrust him aside from the heirship, of which he had been so certain, and made everything more indefinite than ever, there occurred a lull in the family story. All that could be done was to await the event which should determine whether a new boy was to spring of the old Austin stock, or the conspiracy to come to nothing in the person of a girl. All depended upon Providence, as Miss Susan said, with the strange mixture of truth and falsehood which distinguished this

extraordinary episode in her life. She said this without a change of countenance, and it was absolutely true. If Providence chose to defeat her fraud, and bring all her wicked plans to nothing, it was still within the power of Heaven to do so in the most natural and simple way. In short, it thus depended upon Providence—she said to herself, in the extraordinary train of casuistical reasoning which went through her mind on this point—whether she really should be guilty of this wrong or not. It was a kind of *Sortes* into which she had thrown herself—much as a man might do who put it upon the hazard of a "toss-up" whether he should kill another man or not. The problematical murderer might thus hold that some power outside of himself had to do with his decision between crime and innocence; and so did Miss Susan. It was, she said to herself, within the arbitration of Providence—Providence alone could decide; and the guilty flutter with which her heart sometimes woke in her, in the uncertainty of the chances before her, was thus calmed down by an almost pious sense (as she felt it) of dependence upon "a higher hand." I do not attempt to explain this curious mixture of the habits of an innocent and honourable and even religious mind, with the novel and extraordinary impulse to a great wrong which had

seized upon Miss Susan once in her life, without, so to speak, impairing her character, or indeed having any immediate effect upon its general strain. She would catch herself even saying a little prayer for the success of her crime sometimes, and would stop short with a hard-drawn breath, and such a quickening of all her pulses as nothing in her life had ever brought before; but generally her mind was calmed by the thought that as yet nothing was certain, but all in the hands of Providence; and that her final guilt, if she was doomed to be guilty, would be in some way sanctioned and justified by the deliberate decision of Heaven.

This uncertainty it was, no doubt, which kept up an excitement in her, not painful except by moments, a strange quickening of life, which made the period of her temptation feel like a new era in her existence. She was not unhappy, neither did she feel guilty, but only excited, possessed by a secret spring of eagerness and intentness which made all life more energetic and vital. This, as I have said, was almost more pleasurable than painful; but in one way she paid the penalty. The new thing became her master-thought: she could not get rid of it for a moment. Whatever she was doing, whatever thinking of, this came constantly uppermost. It looked her in

the face, so to speak, the first thing in the morning, and never left her but reluctantly when she went to sleep at the close of the day, mingling broken visions of itself even with her dreams, and often waking her up with a start in the dead of night. It haunted her like a ghost; and though it was not accompanied by any sense of remorse, her constant consciousness of its presence gradually had an effect upon her life. Her face grew anxious; she moved less steadily than of old; she almost gave up her knitting and such meditative occupations, and took to reading desperately when she was not immersed in business—all to escape from the thing by her side, though it was not in itself painful. Thus gradually, insidiously, subtlely, the evil took possession of her life.

As for Farrel-Austin, his temper and general sensibility were impaired by Miss Susan's intimation to an incalculable degree. There was no living with him, all his family said. He too awaited the decision of Providence, but in anything but a pious way; and poor Mrs. Farrel-Austin had much to bear which no one heard of. "Feel poorly! What is the good of your feeling poorly?" he would say to her with whimsical brutality. "Any other woman but you would have seen what was required of

her. Why, even that creature at Bruges—that widow! It is what women were made for; and there isn't a labourer's wife in the parish but is up to as much as that."

"Oh, Farrel, how can you be so unkind?" the poor woman would say. "But if I had a little girl you would be quite as angry, and that could not be my fault."

"Have a girl if you dare!" said the furious heir-presumptive. And thus he awaited the decision of Providence —more innocently, but in a much less becoming way, than Miss Susan did. It was not a thing that was publicly spoken of, neither was the world in general aware what was the new question which had arisen between the two houses, but its effects were infinitely less felt in Whiteladies than in the internal comfort of the Hatch.

In the midst of this *sourd* and suppressed excitement, however, the new possibility about Herbert, which poor Augustine had given solemn thanks for, but which all the experienced people had treated as folly, began to grow and acquire something like reality. A dying life may rally and flicker in the socket for a day or two, but when the improvement lasts for a whole month, and goes on increasing, even the greatest sceptic must pause and

consider. It was not till Reine's letter arrived, telling the doctor's last opinion that there had always been something peculiar in the case, and that he could no longer say that recovery was impossible, that Miss Susan's mind first really opened to the idea. She was by herself when this letter came, and read it, shaking her head and saying "Poor child!" as usual; but, when she had got to the end, Miss Susan made a pause and drew a long breath, and began at the beginning again, with a curiously awakened look in her face. In the middle of this second reading she suddenly sprang up from her seat, said loud out (being all alone), "*There will be no need for it then!*" and burst into a sudden flood of tears. It was as if some fountain had opened in her breast; she could not stop crying, or saying things to herself, in the strange rapture that came upon her. "No need, no need; it will not matter!" she said again and again, not knowing what she was saying.

"What will not matter?" said Augustine, who had come in softly and stood by, looking on with grave surprise.

Augustine knew nothing about Bruges—not even of the existence of the Austins there, and less (I need not say) of the decision of Providence for which her sister waited.

Miss Susan started to her feet and ran to her, and put the letter into her hand.

"I do begin to believe the boy will get well," she cried, her eyes once more overflowing.

Her sister could not understand her excitement: she herself had made up her simple mind to Herbert's certain recovery long before, when the first letter came.

"Yes, he will recover," she said; "I do not go by the doctor, but by my feelings. For some time I have been quite sure that an answer was coming, and Mary Matthews has said the same thing to me. We did not know, of course, when it would come. Yes, he will get better. Though it was so very discouraging, we have never ceased, never for a day——"

"Oh, my dear!" said Miss Susan, her heart penetrated and melting, "you have a right to put confidence in your prayers, for you are as good as a child. Pray for us all that our sins may be forgiven us. You don't know, you could not think, what evil things come into some people's minds."

"I knew you were in temptation," said Augustine gently; and she went away, asking no questions, for it was the time for her almshouses' service, which nothing ever was permitted to disturb.

And the whole parish, which had shaken its head and doubted, yet was very ready to believe news that had a half-miraculous air, now accepted Herbert's recovery as certain. "See what it is to be rich," some of the people said; "if it had been one o' our poor lads, he'd been dead years ago." The people at the Almshouses regarded it in a different way. Even the profane ones among them, like old John, who was conscious of doing very little to swell the prayers of the community, felt a certain pride in the news, as if they had something to do with the event. "We've prayed him back to life," said old Mrs. Matthews, who was very anxious that some one should send an account of it to the *Methodist Magazine*, and had the courage to propose this step to Dr. Richard, who nearly fainted at the proposition. Almost all the old people felt a curious thrill of innocent vanity at having thus been instrumental in so important an event; but the village generally resented this view, and said it was like their impudence to believe that God Almighty would take so much notice of folks in an Almshouse. Dr. Richard himself did not quite know what to say on the subject. He was not sure that it was "in good taste" to speak of it so, and he did not think the Church approved of any such practical identification of the benefit of her prayers.

In a more general way, yes; but to say that Herbert's recovery and the prayers of the Almshouses were cause and effect was rather startling to him. He said to his wife that it was "Dissenterish"—a decision in which she fully agreed. "Very Dissenterish, my dear, and not at all in good taste," Mrs. Richard said.

But while the public in general, and the older persons involved, were thus affected by the news, it had its effect too, in conjunction with other circumstances, upon the young people, who were less immediately under its influence. Everard Austin, who was not the heir-presumptive, and indeed now knew himself to be another degree off from that desirable position, felt nothing but joy at his cousin's amendment; and the girls at the Hatch were little affected by the failure of their father's immediate hopes. But other things came in to give it a certain power over their future lives. Kate took it so seriously upon herself to advise Sophy as to her future conduct in respect to the recovered invalid, that Sophy was inspired to double efforts for the enjoyment of the present moment, which might, if she accepted her sister's suggestion, contain all that was left to her of the pleasures of life.

"Do it myself? No; I could not do it myself," said

Kate, when they discussed the subject, "for he is younger than I am; you are just the right age for him. You will have to spend the winters abroad," she added, being of a prudent and forecasting mind, "so you need not say you will get no fun out of your life. Rome and these sort of places, where he would be sure to be sent to, are great fun when you get into a good set. You had far better make up your mind to it; for, as for Alf, he is no good, my dear; he is only amusing himself; you may take my word for that."

"And so am I amusing myself," Sophy said, her cheeks blazing with indignation at this uncalled-for stroke; "and, what's more, I mean to, like you and Dropmore are doing. I can see as far into a milestone as any of you," cried the young lady, who cared as little for grammar as for other colloquial delicacies.

And thus it was that the fun grew faster and more furious than ever; and these two fair sisters flew about both town and country, wherever gaiety was going, and were seen on the top of more drags, and had more dancing, more flirting, and more pleasuring, than two girls of unblemished character are often permitted to indulge in. Poor Everard was dreadfully "out of it" in that *bruyant* summer. He had no drag, nor any particular

way of being useful, except by boats ; and, as Kate truly said, a couple of girls cannot drag about a man with them, even though he is their cousin. I do not think he would have found much fault with their gaiety had he shared in it; and though he did find fault with their slang, there is a piquancy in acting as Mentor to two girls so pretty which seems to carry its own reward with it. But Everard disapproved very much when he found himself left out, and easily convinced himself that they were going a great deal too far, and that he was grieved, annoyed, and even disgusted by their total departure from womanly tranquillity. He did not know what to do with himself in his desolate and *délaissé* condition, hankering after them and their society, and yet disapproving of it, and despising their friends and their pleasures, as he said to himself he did. He felt dreadfully, dolefully superior, after a few days, in his water-side cottage, and as if he could never again condescend to the vulgar amusements which were popular at the Hatch; and an impulse moved him—half from a generous and friendly motive, half on his own behalf—to go to Switzerland, where there was always variety to be had, and to join his young cousins there, and help to nurse Herbert back into strength and health. It was a very natural reaction, though I do not

think he was sensible of it, which made his mind turn with a sudden rebound to Reine, after Kate and Sophy had been unkind to him. Reine was hasty and high-spirited, and had made him feel now and then that she did not quite approve of him; but she never would have left him in the lurch, as the other girls had done; and he was very fond of Herbert, and very glad of his recovery; and he wanted change: so that all these causes together worked him to a sudden resolution; and this was how it happened that he appeared all at once, without preface or announcement, in the Kanderthal, before the little inn, like an angel sent to help her in her extremity, at Reine's moment of greatest need.

And whether it was the general helpfulness, hopefulness, and freshness of the stranger, like a wholesome air from home, or whether it was a turning-point in the malady, I cannot tell, but Herbert began to mend from that very night. Everard infused a certain courage into them all. He relieved Reine, whose terrible disappointment had stupified her, and who for the first time had utterly broken down under the strain which overtasked her young faculties. He roused up François, who, though he went on steadily with his duty, was out of heart too, and had resigned himself to his young

master's death. "He has been as bad before, and got better," Everard said, though he did not believe what he was saying; but he made both Reine and François believe it, and, what was still better, Herbert himself, who rallied and made a last desperate effort to get hold again of the thread of life, which was so fast slipping out of his languid fingers. "It is a relapse," said Everard, "an accidental relapse, from the wetting; he has not really lost ground." And to his own wonder he gradually saw this pious falsehood grow into a truth.

To the great wonder of the valley too, which took so much interest in the poor young Englishman, and which had already settled where to bury him, and held itself ready at any moment to weep over the news which everybody expected, the next bulletin was that Herbert was better; and from that moment he gradually, slowly, mended again, toiling back by languid degrees to the hopeful though invalid state from which he had fallen. Madame de Mirfleur arrived two days after, when the improvement had thoroughly set in, and she never quite realised how near death her son had been. He was still ill enough, however, to justify her in blaming herself much for having left him, and in driving poor Reine frantic with the inference that only in his mother's

absence could he have been exposed to such a danger. She did not mean to blame Reine, whose devotion to her brother and admirable care of him she always boasted of, but I think she sincerely believed that under her own guardianship, in this point at least, her son would have been more safe. But the sweet bells of Reine's nature had all been jangled out of tune by these events. The ordinary fate of those who look for miracles had befallen her: her miracle, in which she believed so firmly, had failed, and all heaven and earth had swung out of balance. Her head swam, and the world with it, swaying under her feet at every step she took. Everything was out of joint to Reine. She had tried to be angelically good, subduing every rising of temper and unkind feeling, quenching not only every word on her lips, but every thought in her heart, which was not kind and forbearing. But what did it matter? God had not accepted the offering of her goodness nor the entreaties of her prayers; He had changed his mind again; He had stopped short and interrupted his own work. Reine allowed all the old bitterness which she had tried so hard to subdue to pour back into her heart. When Madame de Mirfleur, going into her son's room, made that speech at the door about her deep regret at having left her boy, the girl could not

restrain herself. She burst out to Everard, who was standing by, the moment her mother was out of the room.

"Oh, it is cruel, cruel!" she cried. "Is it likely that I would risk Herbert's life—I that have only Herbert in all the world? We are nothing to her—nothing! in comparison with that—that gentleman she has married, and those babies she has," cried poor Reine.

It seemed somewhat absurd to Everard that she should speak with such bitterness of her mother's husband; but he was kind, and consoled her.

"Dear Reine, she did not blame you," he said; "she only meant that she was sorry to have been away from you; and of course it is natural that she should care—a little, for her husband and her other children."

"Oh! you don't, you cannot understand!" said Reine. "What did she want with a husband?—and other children? That is the whole matter. Your mother belongs to you, doesn't she? or else she is not your mother."

When she had given forth this piece of triumphant logic with all the fervour and satisfaction of her French blood, Reine suddenly felt the shame of having betrayed herself and blamed her mother. Her flushed face grew

pale, her voice faltered. "Everard, don't mind what I say. I am angry, and unhappy, and cross, and I don't know what is the matter with me," cried the poor child.

"You are worn out; that is what is the matter with you," said Everard, strong in English common sense. "There is nothing that affects the nerves and the temper like an overstrain of your strength. You must be quite quiet, and let yourself be taken care of, now Herbert is better, and you will get all right again. Don't cry; you are worn out, my poor little queen."

"Don't call me that," said the girl, weeping; "it makes me think of the happy times before he was ill, and of Aunt Susan and home."

"And what could you think of better?" said Everard. "By-and-by — don't cry, queenie!—the happy days will come back, and you and I will take Herbert home."

And he took her hand and held it fast, and, as she went on crying, kissed it, and said many a soft word of consolation. He was her cousin, and had been brought up with her; so it was natural. But I do not know what Everard meant, neither did he know himself: "You and I will take Herbert home." The words had a curious effect upon both the young people—upon her

who listened and him who spoke. They seemed to imply a great deal more than they really meant.

Madame de Mirfleur did not see this little scene, which probably would have startled and alarmed her; but quite independently there rose up in her mind an idea which pleased her, and originated a new interest in her thoughts. It came to her as she sat watching Herbert, who was sleeping softly after the first airing of his renewed convalescence. He was so quiet and doing so well that her mind was at ease about him, and free to proceed to other matters; and from these thoughts of hers arose a little comedy in the midst of the almost tragedy which kept the little party so long prisoners in the soft seclusion of the Kanderthal.

CHAPTER II.

MADAME DE MIRFLEUR had more anxieties connected with her first family than merely the illness of her son; she had also the fate of her daughter to think of, and I am not sure that the latter disquietude did not give her the most concern. Herbert, poor boy, could but die, which would be a great grief, but an end of all anxiety, whereas Reine was likely to live, and cause much anxiety, unless her future were properly cared for. Reine's establishment in life had been a very serious thought to Madame de Mirfleur since the girl was about ten years old; and though she was only eighteen as yet, her mother was well aware how negligent English relatives are in this particular, leaving a girl's marriage to chance, or what they are pleased to call Providence, or more likely her own silly fancy, without taking any trouble to establish her suitably in life. She had thought much, very much, of this, and of the great unlikelihood, on the other hand, of Reine, with her English ways, submitting

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to her mother's guidance in so important a matter, or accepting the husband whom she might choose; and if the girl was obstinate and threw herself back, as was most probable, on the absurd *laisser-aller* of the English, the chances were that she would never find a proper settlement at all. These thoughts, temporarily suspended when Herbert was at his worst, had come up again with double force as she ceased to be completely occupied by him; and when she found Everard with his cousins, a new impulse was given to her imagination. Madame de Mirfleur had known Everard more or less since his boyhood; she liked him, for his manners were always pleasant to women. He was of suitable age, birth, and disposition; and though she did not quite know the amount of his means, which was the most important preliminary of all, he could not be poor, as he was of no profession, and free to wander about the world as only rich young men can do. Madame de Mirfleur felt that it would be simply criminal on her part to let such an occasion slip. In the intervals of their nursing, accordingly, she sought Everard's company, and had long talks with him when no one else was by. She was a pretty woman still, though she was Reine's mother, and had all the graces of her nation, and that conversational skill

which is so thoroughly French; and Everard, who liked the society of women, had not the least objection on his side to her companionship. In this way she managed to find out from him what his position was, and to form a very good guess at his income, and to ascertain many details of his life, with infinite skill, tact, and patience, and without in the least alarming the object of her study. She found out that he had a house of his own, and money enough to sound very well indeed when put into francs, which she immediately did by means of mental calculations, which cost her some time and a considerable effort. This, with so much more added to it, in the shape of Reine's *dot*, would make altogether, she thought, a very pretty fortune; and evidently the two were made for each other. They had similar tastes and habits in many points; one was twenty-five, the other eighteen; one dark, the other fair; one impulsive and high-spirited, with quick French blood in her veins, the other tranquil, with all the English ballast necessary. Altogether, it was such a marriage as might have been made in heaven; and if heaven had not seen fit to do it, Madame de Mirfleur felt herself strong enough to remedy this inadvertence. It seemed to her that she would be neglecting her chief duty as Reine's mother if she allowed this oppor-

tunity to slip through her hands. To be sure, it would have been more according to *les convenances*, had there been a third party at hand, a mutual friend to undertake the negotiation; but, failing any one else, Madame de Mirfleur felt that, rather than lose such an "occasion," she must, for once, neglect the *convenances*, and put herself into the breach.

"I do not understand how it is that your friends do not marry you," she said one day when they were walking together. "Ah, you laugh, Monsieur Everard. I know that is not your English way; but, believe me, it is the duty of the friends of every young person. It is a dangerous thing to choose for yourself; for how should you know what is in a young girl? You can judge by nothing but looks and outside manners, which are very deceitful, while a mother or a judicious friend would sound her character. You condemn our French system, you others, but that is because you don't know. For example, when I married my present husband, M. de Mirfleur, it was an affair of great deliberation. I did not think at first that his property was so good as I had a right to expect, and there was some scandal about his grandparents, which did not quite please me. But all that was smoothed away in process of time, and a

personal interview convinced me that I should find in him everything that a reasonable woman desires. And so I do; we are as happy as the day. With poor Herbert's father the affair was very different. There was no deliberation—no time for thought. With my present experience, had I known that daughters do not inherit in England, I should have drawn back, even at the last moment. But I was young, and my friends were not so prudent as they ought to have been, and we did what you call fall in love. Ah, it is a mistake! a mistake! In France things are a great deal better managed. I wish I could convert you to my views."

"It would be very easy for Madame de Mirfleur to convert me to anything," said Everard, with a skill which he must have caught from her, and which, to tell the truth, occasioned himself some surprise.

"Ah, you flatter!" said the lady; "but seriously, if you will think of it, there are a thousand advantages on our side. For example, now, if I were to propose to you a charming young person whom I know—not one whom I have seen on the surface, but whom I know *au fond*, you understand—with a *dot* that would be suitable, good health, and good temper, and everything that

is desirable in a wife? I should be sure of my facts, you could know nothing but the surface. Would it not then be much better for you to put yourself into my hands, and take my advice?"

"I have no doubt of it," said Everard, once more, gallantly; "if I wished to marry, I could not do better than put myself in such skilful hands."

"If you wished to marry—ah, bah! if you come to that, perhaps there are not many who wish to marry, for that sole reason," said Madame de Mirfleur.

"Pardon me; but why then should they marry at all?" said Everard.

"Ah, fie, fie! you are not so innocent as you appear," she said. "Need I tell to you the many reasons? Besides, it is your duty. No man can be really a trustworthy member of society till he has married and ranged himself. It is clearly your duty to range yourself at a certain time of life, and accept the responsibilities that nature imposes. Besides, what would become of us if young men did not marry? There would be a mob of *mauvais sujets*, and no society at all. No, mon ami, it is your duty; and when I tell you I have a very charming young person in my eye——"

"I should like to see her very much. I have no

doubt your taste is excellent, and that we should agree in most points," said Everard, with a laugh.

"Perhaps," said Madame de Mirfleur, humouring him; "a very charming young person," she added, seriously, "with, let us say, a hundred and fifty thousand francs. What would you say to that for the *dot?*"

"Exactly the right sum, I have no doubt—if I had the least notion how much it was," said Everard, entering into the joke, as he thought; "but, pardon my impatience, the young person herself——"

"Extremely *comme il faut*," said the lady, very gravely. "You may be sure I should not think of proposing any one who was not of good family; noble of course; that is what you call gentlefolks—you English. Young—at the most charming age indeed—not too young to be a companion, nor too old to adapt herself to your wishes. A delightful disposition, lively—a little impetuous perhaps."

"Why this is a paragon!" said Everard, beginning to feel a slight uneasiness. He had not yet a notion whom she meant; but a suspicion that this was no joke, but earnest, began to steal over his mind: he was infinitely amused; but, notwithstanding his curiosity and relish of the fun, was too honourable and delicate not to be a little afraid of letting it go too far. "She must be ugly to

make up for so many virtues; otherwise how could I hope that such a bundle of excellence would even look at me?"

"On the contrary, there are many people who think her pretty," said Madame de Mirfleur; "perhaps I am not quite qualified to judge. She has charming bright eyes, good hair, good teeth, a good figure, and, I think I may say, a very favourable disposition, Monsieur Everard, towards you."

"Good heavens!" cried the young man; and he blushed hotly and made an endeavour to change the subject. "I wonder if this Kanderthal is quite the place for Herbert," he said hastily; "don't you think there is a want of air? My own opinion is that he would be better on higher ground."

"Yes, probably," said Madame de Mirfleur, smiling. "Ah, Monsieur Everard, you are afraid; but do not shrink so, I will not harm you. You are very droll, you English—what you call *prude*. I will not frighten you any more; but I have a regard for you, and I should like to marry you all the same."

"You do me too much honour," said Everard, taking off his hat and making his best bow. Thus he tried to carry off his embarrassment; and Madame de Mirfleur

did not want any further indication that she had gone far enough, but stopped instantly, and began to talk to him with all the ease of her nation about a hundred other subjects, so that he half forgot this assault upon him, or thought he had mistaken, and that it was merely her French way. She was so lively and amusing, indeed, that she completely reassured him, and brought him back to the inn in the best of humours with her and with himself. Reine was standing on the balcony as they came up, and her face brightened as he looked up and waved his hand to her. "It works," Madame de Mirfleur said to herself; but even she felt that for a beginning she had said quite enough.

In a few days after, to her great delight, a countryman of her own—a gentleman whom she knew, and who was acquainted with her family and antecedents—appeared in the Kanderthal, on his way, by the Gemmi pass, to the French side of Switzerland. She hailed his arrival with the sincerest pleasure, for, indeed, it was much more proper that a third party should manage the matter. M. de Bonneville was a grey-haired, middle-aged Frenchman, very straight and very grave, with a grizzled moustache and a military air. He understood her at a word, as was natural, and when she took him aside and

explained to him all her fears and difficulties about Reine, and the terrible neglect of English relations in this the most important point in a girl's life, his heart was touched with admiration of the true motherly solicitude thus confided to him.

"It is not perhaps the moment I would have chosen," said Madame de Mirfleur, putting her handkerchief to her eyes, "while my Herbert is still so ill; but what would you, cher Baron? My other child is equally dear to me; and when she gets among her English relations, I shall never be able to do anything for my Reine."

"I understand, I understand," said M. de Bonneville; "believe me, dear lady, I am not unworthy of so touching a confidence. I will take occasion to make myself acquainted with this charming young man, and I will seize the first opportunity of presenting the subject to him in such a light as you would wish."

"I must make you aware of all the details," said the lady, and she disclosed to him the amount of Reine's *dot*, which pleased M. de Bonneville much, and made him think, if this negotiation came to nothing, of a son of his own, who would find it a very agreeable addition to his *biens*. "Decidedly Mademoiselle Reine is not a *partie* to be neglected," he said, and made a note of all the

chief points. He even put off his journey for three or four days, in order to be of use to his friend, and to see how the affair would end.

From this time Everard found his company sought by the new-comer with a persistency which was very flattering. M. de Bonneville praised his French, and though he was conscious he did not deserve the praise, he was immensely flattered by it; and his new friend sought information upon English subjects with a serious desire to know, which pleased Everard still more. "I hope you are coming to England, as you want to know so much about it," he said, in an Englishman's cordial yet unmannerly way.

"I propose to myself to go some time," said the cautious Baron, thinking that probably if he arranged this marriage, the grateful young people might give him an invitation to their château in England; but he was very cautious, and did not begin his attack till he had known Everard for three days at least, which, in Switzerland, is as good as a friendship of years.

"Do you stay with your cousins?" he said one day when they were walking up the hillside on the skirts of the Gemmi. M. de Bonneville was a little short of breath, and would pause frequently, not caring to confess

this weakness, to admire the view. The valley lay stretched out before them like a map, the snowy hills retiring at their right hand, the long line of heathery broken land disappearing into the distance on the other, and the village, with its little bridge and wooden houses straggling across its river. Herbert's wheeled chair was visible on the road like a child's toy, Reine walking by her brother's side. "It is beautiful, the devotion of that charming young person to her brother," M. de Bonneville said, with a sudden burst of sentiment; "pardon me, it is too much for my feelings! Do you mean to remain with this so touching group, Monsieur Austin, or do you proceed to Italy, like myself?"

"I have not made up my mind," said Everard. "So long as I can be of any use to Herbert, I will stay."

"Poor young man! it is to be hoped he will get better, though I fear it is not very probable. How sad it is, not only for himself, but for his charming sister! One can understand Madame de Mirfleur's anxiety to see her daughter established in life."

"Is she anxious on that subject?" said Everard, half laughing. "I think she may spare herself the trouble. Reine is very young, and there is time enough."

"That is one of the points, I believe, on which our

two peoples take different views," said M. de Bonneville, good-humouredly. "In France it is considered a duty with parents to marry their children well and suitably—which is reasonable, you will allow, at least."

"I do not see, I confess," said Everard, with a little British indignation, "how, in such a matter, any one man can choose for another. It is the thing of all others in which people must please themselves."

"You think so? Well," said M. de Bonneville, shrugging his shoulders, "the one does not hinder the other. You may still please yourself, if your parents are judicious and place before you a proper choice."

Everard said nothing. He cut down the thistles on the side of the road with his cane to give vent to his feelings, and mentally shrugged his shoulders too. What was the use of discussing such a subject with a Frenchman? As if they could be fit to judge, with their views!

"In no other important matter of life," said M. de Bonneville, insinuatingly, "do we allow young persons at an early age to decide for themselves; and this, pardon me for saying so, is the most impossible of all. How can a young girl of eighteen come to any wise conclusion in a matter so important? What can her grounds be for forming a judgment? She knows neither men nor

life ; it is not to be desired that she should. How then is she to judge what is best for her? Pardon me, the English are a very sensible people, but this is a *bêtise :* I can use no other word."

"Well, sir," said Everard hotly, with a youthful blush, "among us we still believe in such a thing as love."

"Mon jeune ami," said his companion, "I also believe in it; but tell me, what is a girl to love who knows nothing? Black eyes or blue, light hair or dark, him who valses best, or him who sings? What does she know more? what do we wish the white creature to know more? But when her parents say to her—'Chérie, here is some one whom with great care we have chosen, whom we know to be worthy of your innocence, whose sentiments and principles are such as do him honour, and whose birth and means are suitable. Love him, if you can ; he is worthy'—once more pardon me," said M. de Bonneville, "it seems to me that this is more accordant with reason than to let a child decide her fate upon the experience of a soirée de bal. We think so in France."

Everard could not say much in reply to this. There rose up before him a recollection of Kate and Sophy mounted high on Dropmore's drag, and careering over the country with that hero and his companions under

the nominal guardianship of a young matron as rampant as themselves. They were perfectly able to form a judgment upon the relative merits of the Guardsmen; perfectly able to set himself aside coolly as nobody, which was, I fear, the head and front of their offending. Perhaps there were cases in which the Frenchman might be right.

"The case is almost, but I do not say quite, as strong with a young man," said M. de Bonneville. "Again it is the experience of the soirée de bal which you would trust to in place of the anxious selection of friends and parents. A young girl is not a statue to be measured at a glance. Her excellences are modest," said the mutual friend, growing enthusiastic. "She is something *cachée*, sacred; it is but her features, her least profound attractions, which can be learned in a valse or a party of pleasure. Mademoiselle Reine is a very charming young person," he continued, in a more business-like tone. "Her mother has confided to me her anxieties about her. I have a strong inclination to propose to Madame de Mirfleur my second son Oscar, who, though I say it who should not, is as fine a young fellow as it is possible to see."

Everard stopped short in his walk, and looked at him

menacingly, clenching his fist unawares. It was all he could do to subdue his fury and keep himself from pitching the old match-maker headlong down the hill. So that was what the specious old humbug was thinking of! His son, indeed; some miserable, puny Frenchman—for Reine! Everard's blood boiled in his veins, and he could not help looking fiercely in his companion's face; he was speechless with consternation and wrath. Reine! that they should discuss her like a bale of goods, and marry her perhaps, poor little darling!—if there was no one to interfere.

"Yes," said M. de Bonneville meditatively. "The *dot* is small, smaller than Oscar has a right to expect; but in other ways the *parti* is very suitable. It would seal an old friendship, and it would secure the happiness of two families. Unfortunately the post has gone to-day, but to-morrow I will write to Oscar and suggest it to him. I do not wish for a more sweet daughter-in-law than Mademoiselle Reine."

"But can you really for a moment suppose that Reine——!" thundered forth the Englishman. "Good heavens! what an extraordinary way you have of ordering affairs! Reine, poor girl, with her brother ill, her heart bursting, all her mind absorbed, to be roused up in

order to have some fine young gentleman presented to her! It is incredible—it is absurd—it is cruel!" said the young man, flushed with anger and indignation. His companion while he stormed did nothing but smile.

"Cher Monsieur Everard," he said, "I think I comprehend your feelings. Believe me, Oscar shall stand in no one's way. If you desire to secure this pearl for yourself, trust to me; I will propose it to Madame de Mirfleur. You are about my son's age; probably rich, as all you English are rich. To be sure, there is a degree of relationship between you; but then you are Protestants both, and it does not matter. If you will favour me with your confidence about preliminaries, I understand all your delicacy of feeling. As an old friend of the family I will venture to propose it to Madame de Mirfleur."

"You will do nothing of the kind," said Everard furious. "I—address myself to any girl by a go-between! I—insult poor Reine at such a moment! You may understand French delicacy of feeling, M. de Bonneville, but when we use such words we English mean something different. If any man should venture to interfere so in my private affairs—or in my cousin's either for that matter——"

"Monsieur Everard, I think you forget yourself," said the Frenchman with dignity.

"Yes; perhaps I forget myself. I don't mean to say anything disagreeable to you, for I suppose you mean no harm; but if a countryman of my own had presumed —had ventured——. Of course I don't mean to use these words to you," said Everard, conscious that a quarrel on such a subject with a man of double his age would be little desirable; "it is our different ways of thinking. But pray be good enough, M. de Bonneville, to say nothing to Madame de Mirfleur about me."

"Certainly not," said the Frenchman with a smile, "if you do not wish it. Here is the excellence of our system, which, by means of leaving the matter in the hands of a third party, avoids all offence or misunderstanding. Since you do not wish it, I will write to Oscar to-night."

Everard gave him a look, which if looks were explosive might have blown him across the Gemmi. "You mistake me," he said, not knowing what he said; "I will not have my cousin interfered with, any more than myself——"

"Ah, forgive me! that is going too far," said the Frenchman; "that is what you call dog in the manger.

You will not eat yourself, and you would prevent others from eating. I have her mother's sanction, which is all that is important, and my son will be here in three days. Ah! the sun is beginning to sink behind the hills. How beautiful is that rose-flush on the snow! With your permission I will turn back and make the descent again. The hour of sunset is never wholesome. Pardon, we shall meet at the *table d'hôte*."

Everard made him the very slightest possible salutation, and pursued his walk in a state of excitement and rage which I cannot describe. He went miles up the hill in his fervour of feeling, not knowing where he went. What! traffic in Reine—sell Reine to the best bidder; expose her to a cold-blooded little beast of a Frenchman, who would come and look at the girl to judge whether he liked her as an appendage to her *dot!* Everard's rage and dismay carried him almost to the top of the pass before he discovered where he was.

CHAPTER III.

EVERARD was too late, as might have been expected, for the *table d'hôte*. When he reached the village, very tired after his long walk, he met the diners there, strolling about in the soft evening—the men with their cigars, the ladies in little groups in their evening toilettes, which were of an unexciting character. On the road, at a short distance from the hotel, he encountered Madame de Mirfleur and M. de Bonneville, no doubt planning the advent of M. Oscar, he thought to himself, with renewed fury; but, indeed, they were only talking over the failure of their project in respect to himself. Reine was seated in the balcony above, alone, looking out upon the soft night and the distant mountains, and soothed, I think, by the hum of voices close at hand, which mingled with the sound of the waterfall, and gave a sense of fellowship and society. Everard looked up at her and waved his hand, and begged her to wait till he should come. There was a new moon making her way upwards in the

pale sky, not yet quite visible behind the hills. Reine's face was turned towards it with a certain wistful stillness which went to Everard's heart. She was in this little world, but not of it. She had no part in the whisperings and laughter of those groups below. Her young life had been plucked out of the midst of life, as it were, and wrapped in the shadows of a sick-chamber, when others like her were in the full tide of youthful enjoyment. As Everard dived into the dining-room of the inn to snatch a hasty meal, the perpetual contrast which he was always making in spite of himself came back to his mind. I think he continued to have an unconscious feeling, of which he would have been ashamed had it been forced upon his notice or put into words, that he had himself a choice to make between his cousins—though how he could have chosen both Kate and Sophy I am at a loss to know, and he never separated the two in his thoughts. When he looked, as it were, from Reine to them, he felt himself to descend ever so far in the scale. Those pretty gay creatures "enjoyed themselves" a great deal more than poor Reine had ever had it in her power to do. But it was no choice of Reine's which thus separated her from the enjoyments of her kind; was it the mere force of circumstances? Everard could remember Reine as gay

as a bird, as bright as a flower; but he could not connect any idea of her with drags or racecourses. He had himself rowed her on the river many a day, and heard her pretty French songs rising like a fresh spontaneous breeze of melody over the water. Now she looked to him like something above the common course of life—with so much in her eyes that he could not fathom, and such an air of thought and of emotion about her as half attracted, half repelled him. The emotions of Sophy and Kate were all on the surface—thrown off into the air in careless floods of words and laughter. Their sentiments were all boldly expressed; all the more boldly when they were sentiments of an equivocal character. He seemed to hear them, loud, noisy, laughing, moving about in their bright dresses, lawless, scorning all restraint; and then his mind recurred to the light figure seated overhead in the evening darkness, shadowy, dusky, silent, with only a soft whiteness where her face was, and not a sound to betray her presence. Perhaps she was weeping silently in her solitude; perhaps thinking unutterable thoughts; perhaps anxiously planning what she could do for her invalid to make him better or happier, perhaps praying for him. These ideas brought a moisture to Everard's eyes. It was all a peradventure, but there was no perad-

venture, no mystery, about Kate and Sophy; no need to wonder what they were thinking of. Their souls moved in so limited an orbit, and the life which they flattered themselves they knew so thoroughly ran in such a narrow channel, that no one who knew them could go far astray in calculation of what they were about; but Reine was unfathomable in her silence, a little world of individual thought and feeling, into which Everard did not know if he was worthy to enter, and could not divine.

While the young man thus mused—and dined, very uncomfortably — Madame de Mirfleur listened to the report of her agent. She had a lace shawl thrown over her head, over the hair which was still as brown and plentiful as ever, and needed no matronly covering. They walked along among the other groups, straying a little further than the rest, who stopped her from moment to moment as she went on, to ask for her son.

"Better, much better; a thousand thanks," she kept saying. "Really better; on the way to get well, I hope;" and then she would turn an anxious ear to M. de Bonneville. "On such matters sense is not to be expected from the English," she said with a cloud on her face; "they understand nothing. I could not for a moment doubt your discretion, cher Monsieur Bonne-

ville; but perhaps you were a little too open with him, explained yourself too clearly; not that I should think for a moment of blaming you. They are all the same, all the same!—insensate, unable to comprehend."

"I do not think my discretion was at fault," said the Frenchman. "It is, as you say, an inherent inability to understand. If he had not seen the folly of irritating himself, I have no doubt that your young friend would have resorted to the brutal weapons of the English in return for the interest I showed him; in which case," said M. de Bonneville calmly, "I should have been under a painful necessity in respect to him. For your sake, Madame, I am glad that he was able to apologize and restrain himself."

"Juste ciel! that I should have brought this upon you!" cried Madame de Mirfleur; and it was after the little sensation caused in her mind by this that he ventured to suggest that other suitor for Reine.

"My son is already *sous-préfet*," he said. "He has a great career before him. It is a position that would suit Mademoiselle your charming daughter. In his official position, I need not say, a wife of Mademoiselle Reine's distinction would be everything for him; and though we might look for more money, yet I shall willingly waive

that question in consideration of the desirable connections my son would thus acquire; a mother-in-law like Madame de Mirfleur is not to be secured every day," said the negotiant, bowing to his knee.

Madame de Mirfleur, on her part, made such a curtsey as the Kanderthal, overrun by English tourists, had never seen before; and she smiled upon the idea of M. Oscar and his career, and felt that could she but see Reine the wife of a *sous-préfet*, the girl would be well and safely disposed of. But, after her first exultation, a cold shiver came over Reine's mother. She drew her shawl more closely round her.

"Alas!" she said, "so far as I am concerned everything would be easy; but, pity me, cher Baron, pity me! Though I trust I know my duty, I cannot undertake for Reine. What suffering it is to have a child with other rules of action than those one approves of! It should be an example to every one not to marry out of their own country. My child is English to the nail-tips. I cannot help it; it is my desolation. If it is her fancy to find M. Oscar pleasing, all will go well; but if it does not, then our project will be ended; and with such uncertainty can I venture to bring Monsieur your son here, to this little village at the end of the world?"

Thus the elder spirits communed not without serious anxiety; for Reine herself and her *dot* and her relationships seemed so desirable that M. de Bonneville did not readily give up the idea.

"She will surely accept your recommendation," he said, discouraged and surprised.

"Alas! my dear friend, you do not understand the English," said the mother. "The recommendation would be the thing which would spoil all."

"But then the *parti* you had yourself chosen—Monsieur Everard?" said the Frenchman puzzled.

"Ah, cher Baron, he would have managed it all in the English way," said Madame de Mirfleur, almost weeping. "I should have had no need to recommend. You do not know, as I do, the English way."

And they turned back and walked on together under the stars to the hotel door, where all the other groups were clustering, talking of expeditions past and to come. The warm evening air softened the voices and gave to the flitting figures, the half-visible colours, the shadowy groups, a refinement unknown to them in broad daylight. Reine on her balcony saw her mother coming back, and felt in her heart a wondering bitterness. Reine did not care for the tourist society in which, as in every other,

Madame de Mirfleur made herself acquaintances and got a little amusement; yet she could not help feeling (as what girl could in the circumstances?) a secret sense that it was she who had a right to the amusement, and that her own deep and grave anxiety, the wild trembling of her heart, the sadness of the future, and the burden which she was bearing and had to bear every day, would have been more appropriate to her mother, at her mother's age, than to herself. This thought—it was Reine's weakness to feel this painful antagonism towards her mother—had just come into a mind which had been full of better thoughts, when Everard came up-stairs and joined her in the balcony. He too had met Madame de Mirfleur as he came from the hotel, and he thought he had heard the name "Oscar" as he passed her; so that his mind had received a fresh impulse, and was full of indignant thoughts. He came quite softly, however, to the edge of the balcony where Reine was seated, and stood over her, leaning against the window, a dark figure, scarcely distinguishable. Reine's heart stirred softly at his coming; she did not ask herself why; but took it for granted that she liked him to come, because of his kindness and his kinship, and because they had been brought up together, and because of his

brotherly goodness to Herbert, and through Herbert to herself.

"I have got an idea, Reine," he said, in the quick, almost sharp tones of suppressed emotion. "I think the Kanderthal is too close; there is not air enough for Herbert. Let us take him up higher—that is, of course, if the doctor approves."

"I thought you liked the Kanderthal," said Reine, raising her eyes to him, and touched with a visionary disappointment. It hurt her a little to think that he was not pleased with the place in which he had lingered so long for their sakes.

"I like it well enough," said Everard; "but it suddenly occurred to me to-day that, buried down here in a hole, beneath the hills, there is too little air for Bertie. He wants air. It seems to me that is the chief thing he wants. What did the doctor say to-day?"

"He said—what you have always said, Everard—that Bertie had regained his lost ground, and that this last illness was an accident, like the thunderstorm. It might have killed him; but as it has not killed him, it does him no particular harm. That sounds nonsense," said Reine, "but it is what he told me. He is doing well,

the doctor says—doing well; and I can't be half glad—not as I ought."

"Why not, Reine?"

"I can't tell, my heart is so heavy," she cried, putting her hand to her wet eyes. "Before this—accident, as you will call it—I felt, oh, so different! There was one night that I seemed to see and hear God deciding for us. I felt quite sure; there was something in the air, something coming down from the sky. You may laugh, Everard; but to feel that you are quite, quite sure that God is on your side, listening to you, and considering and doing what you ask—oh, you can't tell what a thing it is!"

"I don't laugh, Reine; very, very far from it, dear."

"And then to be disappointed!" she cried; "to feel a blank come over everything, as if there was no one to care, as if God had forgotten or was thinking of something else! I am not quite so bad as that now," she added, with a weary gesture; "but I feel as if it was not God, but only nature or chance or—something, that does it. An accident, you all say—going out when we had better have stayed in; a chance cloud blowing this way, when it might have blown some other way. Oh!" cried Reine, "if that is all, what is the good of living? All accident,

chance; Nature turning this way or the other; no one to sustain you if you are stumbling; no one to say what is to be—and it is! I do not care to live, I do not want to live, if this is all there is to be in the world."

She put her head down in her lap, hidden by her hands. Everard stood over her, deeply touched and wondering, but without a word to say. What could he say? It had never in his life occurred to him to think on such subjects. No great trouble or joy, nothing which stirs the soul to its depths, had ever happened to the young man in his easy existence. He had sailed over the sunny surface of things, and had been content. He could not answer anything to Reine in her first great conflict with the undiscovered universe—the first painful. terrible shadow that had ever come across her childish faith. He did not even understand the pain it gave her, nor how so entirely speculative a matter could give pain. But though he was thus prevented from feeling the higher sympathy, he was very sorry for his little cousin, and reverent of her in this strange affliction. He put his hand softly, tenderly, upon her hidden head, and stroked it in his ignorance, as he might have consoled a child.

"Reine, I am not good enough to say anything to you, even if I knew," he said; "and I don't know. I suppose

God must always be at the bottom of it, whatever happens. We cannot tell or judge, can we? for, you know, we cannot see any more than one side. That's all I know," he added humbly, stroking once more with a tender touch the bowed head which he could scarcely see. How different this was from the life he had come from —from Madame de Mirfleur conspiring about Oscar and how to settle her daughter in life! Reine, he felt, was as far away from it all as heaven is from earth; and somehow he changed as he stood there, and felt a different man; though, indeed, he was not, I fear, at all different, and would have fallen away again in ten minutes, had the call of the gayer voices to which he was accustomed come upon his ear. His piety was of the good, honest, unthinking kind—a sort of placid, stubborn dependence upon unseen power and goodness, which is not to be shaken by any argument, and which outlasts all philosophy—thank heaven for it!—a good sound magnet in its way, keeping the compass right, though it may not possess the higher attributes of spiritual insight or faith.

Reine was silent for a time, in the stillness that always follows an outburst of feeling; but in spite of herself she was consoled—consoled by the voice and touch

which were so soft and kind, and by the steady, unelevated, but in its way certain reality of his assurance. God must be at the bottom of it all—Everard, without thinking much on the subject, or feeling very much, had always a sort of dull, practical conviction of that; and this, like some firm, strong wooden prop to lean against, comforted the visionary soul of Reine. She felt the solid strength of it a kind of support to her, though there might be, indeed, more faith in her aching, miserable doubt than there was in half-a-dozen such convictions as Everard's; yet the commonplace was a support to the visionary in this as in so many other things.

"You want a change, too," said Everard. "You are worn out. Let us go to some of the simple places high up among the hills. I have a selfish reason. I have just heard of some one coming who would—bore you very much. At least, he would bore me very much," said the young man with forced candour. "Let us get away before he comes."

"Is it some one from England?" said Reine.

"I don't know where he is from—last. You don't know him. Never mind the fellow; of course that's nothing to the purpose. But I do wish Herbert would try a less confined air."

"It is strange that the doctor and you should agree so well," said Reine with a smile. "You are sure you did not put it into his head? He wants us to go up to Appenzell, or some such place; and Herbert is to take the cure des sapins and the cure de petit lait. It is a quiet place, where no tourists go. But, Everard, I don't think you must come with us; it will be so dull for you."

"So what? It is evident you want me to pay you compliments. I am determined to go. If I must not accompany you, I will hire a private mule of my own with a side-saddle. Why should not I do the cure de petit lait too?"

"Ah, because you don't want it."

"Is that a reason to be given seriously to a British tourist? It is the very thing to make me go."

"Everard, you laugh; I wish I could laugh too," said Reine. "Probably Herbert would get better the sooner. I feel so heavy—so serious—not like other girls."

"You were neither heavy nor serious in the old times," said Everard, looking down upon her with a stirring of fondness, which was not love, in his heart, "when you used to be scolded for being so French. Did you ever dine solemnly in the old hall since you grew up, Reine?

It is very odd. I could not help looking up to the gallery, and hearing the old scuffle in the corner, and wondering what you thought to see me sitting splendid with the aunts at table. It was very bewildering. I felt like two people, one sitting grown-up down below, the other whispering up in the corner with Reine and Bertie, looking on and thinking it something grand and awful. I shall go there and look at you when we are all at home again. You have never been at Whiteladies since you were grown up, Reine?"

"No," she said, turning her face to him with a soft ghost of a laugh. It was nothing to call a laugh; yet Everard felt proud of himself for having so far succeeded in turning her mood. The moon was up now, and shining upon her, making a whiteness all about her, and throwing shadows of the rails of the balcony, so that Reine's head rose as out of a cage; but the look she turned to him was wistful, half-beseeching, though Reine was not aware of it. She half put out her hand to him. He was helping her out of that prison of grief and anxiety and wasted youth. "How wonderful," she said, "to think we were all children once, not afraid of anything! I can't make it out."

"Speak for yourself, my queen," said Everard. "I

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was always mortally afraid of the ghost in the great staircase. I don't like to go up or down now by myself. Reine, I looked into the old playroom last time I was there. It was when poor Bertie was so ill. There were all our tops and our bats and your music, and I don't know what rubbish besides. It went to my heart. I had to rush off and do something, or I should have broken down and made a baby of myself."

A soft sob came from Reine's throat and relieved her, a rush of tears came to her eyes. She looked up at him, the moon shining so whitely on her face, and glistening in these blobs of moisture, and took his hand in her impulsive way and kissed it, not able to speak. The touch of those velvet lips on his brown hand made Everard jump. Women, even the least experienced, take such a salutation sedately, like Maud in the poem; it comes natural. But to a man the effect is different. He grew suddenly red and hot, and tingling to his very hair. He took her hand in both his with a kind of tender rage, and knelt down and kissed it over and over, as if to make up by forced exaggeration for that desecration of her maiden lips.

"You must not do that," he said, quick and sharply, in tones that sounded almost angry; "you must never

do that, Reine;" and could not get over it, but repeated the words, half scolding her, half weeping over her hand, till poor Reine, confused and bewildered, felt that something new had come to pass between them, and blushed overwhelmingly too, so that the moon had hard ado to keep the upper hand. She had to rise from her seat on the balcony before she could get her hand from him, and felt, as it were, another, happier, more trivial life come rushing back upon her, in a strange maze of pleasure and apprehension and wonder and shamefacedness.

"I think I hear Bertie calling," she said, out of the flutter and confusion of her heart, and went away like a ghost out of the moonlight, leaving Everard, come to himself, leaning against the window, and looking out blankly upon the night.

Had he made a dreadful fool of himself? he asked, when he was thus left alone; then held up his hand, which she had kissed, and looked at it in his strange new thrill of emotion with a half-imbecile smile. He felt himself wondering that the place did not show in the moonlight, and at last put it up to his face, half ashamed, though nobody saw him. What had happened to Everard? He himself could not tell.

CHAPTER IV.

I DO not know that English doctors have the gift of recommending those pleasant simple fictions of treatment which bring their patient face to face with nature, and give that greatest nurse full opportunity to try her powers, as Continental doctors do, in cases where medicine has already tried its powers and failed; the grape cure, the whey cure, the fir-tree cure—turning their patient as it were into the fresh air, among the trees, on the hillsides, and leaving the rest to the mother of us all. François was already strong in the opinion that his master's improvement arose from the *sapins* that perfumed the air in the Kanderthal, and made a solemn music in the wind; and the *cure de petit lait* in the primitive valleys of Appenzell commended itself to the young fanciful party, and to Herbert himself, whose mind was extremely taken up by the idea. He had no sooner heard of it than he began to find the Kanderthal close and airless, as Everard suggested to him, and in his pro-

gressing convalescence the idea of a little change and novelty was delightful to the lad thus creeping back across the threshhold of life. Already he felt himself no invalid, but a young man, with all a young man's hopes before him. When he returned from his daily expedition in his chair he would get out and saunter about for ten minutes, assuming an easy and, as far as he could, a robust air, in front of the hotel, and would answer to the inquiries of the visitors that he was getting strong fast, and hoped soon to be all right. That interruption, however, to his first half-miraculous recovery had affected Herbert something in the same way as it affected Reine. He too had fallen out of the profound sense of an actual interposition of Providence in his favour, out of the saintliness of that resolution to be henceforward "good" beyond measure, by way of proving their gratitude, which had affected them both in so childlike a way. The whole matter had slid back to the lower level of ordinary agencies, nature, accident, what the doctor did, and the careful nurses, what the patient swallowed, the equality of the temperature kept up in his room, and so forth.

This shed a strange blank over it all to Herbert as well as to his sister. He did not seem to have the same tender and awestruck longing to be good. His recovery

was not the same thing as it had been. He got better in a common way, as other men get better. He had come down from the soft eminence on which he had felt himself, and the change had a vulgarising effect, lowering the level somehow of all his thoughts. But Herbert's mind was not sufficiently visionary to feel this as a definite pain, as Reine did. He accepted it, sufficiently content, and perhaps easier on the lower level; and then to feel the springs of health stirring and bubbling after the long languor of deadly sickness is delight enough to dismiss all secondary emotions from the heart. Herbert was anxious to make another move, to appear before a new population, who would not be so sympathetic, so conscious that he had just escaped the jaws of death.

"They are all a little disappointed that I did not die," he said. "The village people don't like it—they have been cheated out of their sensation. I should like to come back in a year or so, when I am quite strong, and show myself; but in the meantime let's move on. If Everard stays, we shall be quite jolly enough by ourselves, we three. We shan't want any other society. I am ready whenever you please."

As for Madame de Mirfleur, however, she was quite indisposed for this move. She protested on Herbert's

behalf, but was silenced by the doctor's opinion. She protested on her own account that it was quite impossible she could go further off into those wilds, further and further from her home; but was stopped by Reine, who begged her mamma not to think of that, since François and she had so often had the charge of Herbert.

"I am sure you will be glad to get back to M. de Mirfleur and the children," Reine said with an ironical cordiality which she might have spared, as her mother never divined what she meant.

"Yes," Madame de Mirfleur answered quite seriously, "that is true, chérie. Of course I shall be glad to get home where they all want me so much; though M. de Mirfleur, to whom I am sorry to see you never do justice, has been very good and has not complained. Still the children are very young, and it is natural I should be anxious to get home. But see what happened last time when I went away," said the mother, not displeased perhaps, much as she lamented its consequences, to have this proof of her own importance handy. "I should never forgive myself if it occurred again."

Reine grew pale and then red, moved beyond bearing, but she dared not say anything, and could only clench her little hands and go out to the balcony to keep herself

from replying. Was it her fault that the thunderstorm came down so suddenly out of a clear sky? She was not the only one who had been deceived. Were there not ever so many parties on the mountains who came home drenched and frightened, though they had experienced guides with them who ought to have known the changes of the sky better than poor little Reine? Still she could not say that this might not have been averted had the mother been there, and thus she was driven frantic, and escaped into the balcony and shut her lips close that she might not reply.

"But I shall go with them and see them safe, for the journey, at least; you may confide in my discretion," said Everard.

Madame de Mirfleur gave him a look, and then looked at Reine upon the balcony. It was a significant glance, and filled Everard with very disagreeable emotions. What did the woman mean? He fell back upon the consciousness that she was French, which of course explained a great deal. French observers always have nonsensical and disagreeable thoughts in their mind. They never can be satisfied with what is, but must always carry out every line of action to its logical end—an intolerable mode of proceeding. Why should she look

from him to Reine? Everard did not consider that Madame de Mirfleur had a dilemma of her own in respect to the two which ought to regulate her movements, and which in the meantime embarrassed her exceedingly. She took Reine aside, not knowing what else to say.

"Chérie," she said, for she was always kind and indulgent, and less moved than an English mother might have been by her child's petulance, "I am not happy about this new fancy my poor Herbert and you have in the head,—the cousin, this Everard; he is very comme il faut, what you call *nice*, and sufficiently good looking and young. What will any one say to me if I let my Reine go away wandering in lonely places with this young man?"

"It is with Herbert I am going," said Reine hastily. "Mamma, do not press me too far; there are some things I could not bear. Everard is nothing to me," she added, feeling her cheeks flush and a great desire to cry come over her. She could not laugh and take this suggestion lightly, easily, as she wished to do, but grew serious, and flushed, and angry in spite of herself.

"My dearest, I did not suppose so," said the mother, always kind, but studying the girl's face closely with her suspicions aroused. "I must think of what is right

for you, chérie," she said. "It is not merely what one feels; Herbert is still ill; he will require to retire himself early, to take many precautions, to avoid the chill of evening and of morning, to rest at midday; and what will my Reine do then? You will be left with the cousin. I have every confidence in the cousin, my child; he is good and honourable, and will take no advantage."

"Mamma, do you think what you are saying?" said Reine almost with violence; "have not you confidence in me? What have I ever done that you should speak like this?"

"You have done nothing, chérie, nothing," said Madame de Mirfleur. "Of course in you I have every confidence—that goes without saying; but it is the man who has to be thought of in such circumstances, not the young girl who is ignorant of the world, and who is never to blame. And then we must consider what people will say. You will have to pass hours alone with the cousin. People will say, 'What is Madame de Mirfleur thinking of to leave her daughter thus unprotected?' It will be terrible; I shall not know how to excuse myself."

"Then it is of yourself, not of me, you are thinking," said Reine with fierce calm.

"You are unkind, my child," said Madame de Mir-

fleur. "I do indeed think what will be said of me—that I have neglected my duty. The world will not blame you; they will say, 'What could the mother be thinking of?' But it is on you, chérie, that the penalty would fall."

"You could tell the world that your daughter was English, used to protect herself, or, rather, not needing any protection," said Reine; "and that you had your husband and children to think of, and could not give your attention to me," she added bitterly.

"That is true, that is true," said Madame de Mirfleur. The irony was lost upon her. Of course the husband and children were the strongest of all arguments in favour of leaving Reine to her own guidance; but as she was a conscientious woman, anxious to do justice to all her belongings, it may be believed that she did not make up her mind easily. Poor soul! not to speak of M. de Mirfleur, the babble of Jeanot and Babette, who never contradicted nor crossed her, in whose little lives there were no problems, who, so long as they were kept from having too much fruit, and allowed to have everything else they wanted, were always pleased and satisfactory, naturally had a charm to their mother which these English children of hers, who were only half hers, and

who set up so many independent opinions and caused her so much anxiety, were destitute of. Poor Madame de Mirfleur felt very deeply how different it was to have grown-up young people to look after, and how much easier as well as sweeter to have babies to pet and spoil. She sighed a very heavy sigh. "I must take time to think it over again," she said. "Do not press me for an answer, chérie; I must think it over; though how I can go away so much further, or how I can let you go alone, I know not. I will take to-day to think of it; do not say any more to-day."

Now I will not say that after the scene in the balcony which I have recorded there had not been a little thrill and tremor in Reine's bosom, half pleasure, half fright, at the notion of going to the mountains in Everard's close company; and that the idea her mother had suggested, that Herbert's invalid habits must infallibly throw the other two much together, had not already passed through Reine's mind with very considerable doubts as to the expediency of the proceeding; but as she was eighteen, and not a paragon of patience or any other perfection, the moment that Madame de Mirfleur took up this view of the question, Reine grew angry and felt insulted, and anxious to prove that she could walk through

all the world by Everard's side, or that of any other, without once stooping from her high maidenly indifference to all men, or committing herself to any foolish sentiment.

Everard too had his private cogitations on the same subject. He was old enough to know a little, though only a very little, about himself, and he did ask himself in a vague, indolent sort of way whether he was ready to accept the possible consequences of being shut up in a mountain solitude like that of Appenzell, not even with Reine, dear reader, for he knew his own weakness, but with any pretty and pleasant girl. Half whimsically he admitted to himself, carefully and with natural delicacy endeavouring to put away Reine personally from the question, that it was more than likely that he would put himself at the feet, in much less than six weeks, of any girl in these exceptional circumstances. And he tried conscientiously to ask himself whether he was prepared to accept the consequences, to settle down with a wife in his waterside cottage, on his very moderate income, or to put himself into unwelcome and unaccustomed harness of work in order to make that income more. Everard quaked and trembled, and acknowledged within himself that it would be much better policy to go away,

and even to run the risk of being slighted by Kate and Sophy, who would lead him into no such danger. He felt that this was the thing to do; and almost made up his mind to do it. But, in the course of the afternoon, he went out to walk by Herbert's wheeled chair to the fir-trees, and instantly, without more ado or any hesitation, plunged into all sorts of plans for what they were to do at Appenzell.

"My dear fellow," said Herbert laughing, "you don't think I shall be up to all those climbings and raids upon the mountains? You and Reine must do them, while I lie under the fir-trees and drink whey. I shall watch you with a telescope," said the invalid.

"To be sure," said Everard cheerily; "Reine and I will have to do the climbing;" and this was his way of settling the question and escaping out of temptation. He looked at Reine, who did not venture to look at him, and felt his heart thrill with the prospect. How could he leave Herbert, who wanted him so much? he asked himself. Cheerful company was half the battle, and variety, and some one to laugh him out of his invalid fancies; and how was it to be expected that Reine could laugh and be cheery all by herself? It would be injurious to both brother and sister, he felt sure, if he

left them, for Reine was already exhausted with the long, unassisted strain; and what would kind Aunt Susan, the kindest friend of his youth, say to him if he deserted the young head of the house?

Thus the question was decided, with a considerable divergence, as will be perceived, between the two different lines of argument, and between the practical and the logical result.

Madame de Mirfleur, though she was more exact in her reasonings, by right of her nation, than these two unphilosophical young persons, followed in some respect their fashion of argument, being swayed aside, as they were, by personal feelings. She did not at all require to think over the disadvantages of the projected expedition, which were as clear as noonday. Reine ought not, she knew, to be left alone, as she would constantly be, by her brother's sickness, with Everard, whom she herself had selected as a most desirable *parti* for her daughter. To throw the young people thus together was against all *les convenances;* it was actually tempting them to commit some folly or other, putting the means into their hands, encouraging them to forget themselves. But then, on the other hand, Madame de Mirfleur said to herself, if the worst came to the worst, and they did fall

absurdly in love with each other, and make an exhibition of themselves, there would be no great harm done, and she would have the ready answer to all objectors, that she had already chosen the young man for her daughter, and considered him as Reine's *fiancé*. This she knew would stop all mouths. "Comme nous devons nous marier!" says the charming *ingénue* in Alfred de Musset's pretty play, when her lover, half awed, half emboldened by her simplicity, wonders she should see no harm in the secret interview he asks. Madame de Mirfleur felt that if anything came of it she could silence all cavillers by "C'est son fiancé," just as at present she could make an end of all critics by "C'est son cousin." As for Oscar de Bonneville, all hopes of him were over if the party made this sudden move, and she must resign herself to that misfortune.

Thus Madame de Mirfleur succeeded like the others in persuading herself that what she wanted to do, *i.e.* return to her husband and children, and leave the young people to their own devices, was in reality the best and kindest thing she could do for them, and that she was securing their best interests at a sacrifice of her own feelings.

It was Herbert whose office it was to extort this consent from her; but to him in his weakness she skimmed

lightly over the difficulties of the situation. He could talk of nothing else, having got the excitement of change, like wine, into his head.

"Mamma, you are not going to set yourself against it. Reine says you do not like it; but when you think what the doctor said——"

He was lying down for his rest after his airing, and very bright-eyed and fragile he looked in his excitement.

"I will set myself against nothing you wish, my dearest," said his mother; "but you know, mon 'Erbert, how I am torn in pieces. I cannot go further from home. M. de Mirfleur is very good; but, now that he knows you are better, how can I expect him to consent that I should go still further away?"

"Reine will take very good care of me, petite mère," said Herbert coaxingly, "and that kind fellow, Everard——"

"Yes, yes, chéri, I know they will take care of you; though your mother does not like to trust you altogether even to your sister," she said with a sigh; "but I must think of my Reine too," she added. "Your kind Everard is a young man, and Reine is a young girl, a fille à marier, and if I leave them together with only you for a chaperon, what will everybody say?"

Upon which Herbert burst into an unsteady boyish

laugh. "Why, old Everard!" he cried; "he is Reine's brother as much as I am. We were all brought up together; we were like one family."

"I have already told mamma so," said Reine rising, and going to the window with a severe air of youthful offence, though her heart was beating and plunging in her breast. She had not told her mother so, and this Madame de Mirfleur knew, though perhaps the girl herself was not aware of it; but the mother was far too wise to take any advantage of this slip.

"Yes, my darlings," she said, "I know it is so; I have always heard him spoken of so; and he is very kind to you, my Herbert, so kind that he makes me love him," she said with natural tears coming to her eyes. "I have been thinking about it all till my head aches. Even if you were to stay here, I could not remain much longer now you are better; and as we could not send him away, it would come to the same thing here. I will tell you what I have thought of doing. I will leave my maid, my good Julie, who is fond of you both, to take care of Reine."

Reine turned round abruptly, with a burning blush on her face, and a wild impulse of resistance in her heart. Was Julie to be left as a policeman to watch and pry, as

if she, Reine, could not take care of herself? But the girl met her mother's eye, which was quite serene and always kind, and her heart smote her for the unnecessary rebellion. She could not yield or restrain herself all at once, but she turned round again and stared out of the window, which was uncivil, but better, the reader will allow, than flying out in unfilial wrath.

"Well," said Herbert approvingly, on whom the intimation had a very soothing effect, "that will be a good thing, mamma, for Reine certainly does not take care of herself. She would wear herself to death, if I and Everard and François would let her. Par exemple!" cried the young man laughing, "who is to be Julie's chaperon? If you are afraid of Reine flirting with Everard, which is not her way, who is to prevent Julie flirting with François? And I assure you he is not at all *rangé*, he, but a terrible fellow. Must I be her chaperon too?"

"Ah, mon bien-aimé, how it does me good to hear you laugh!" cried Madame de Mirfleur with tears in her eyes; and this joke united the little family more than tons of wisdom could have done; for Reine, too, mollified in a moment, came in from the window half crying, half laughing, to kiss her brother out of sheer gratitude

to him for having recovered that blessed faculty. And the invalid was pleased with himself for the effect he had produced, and relished his own wit and repeated it to Everard, when he made his appearance, with fresh peals of laughter, which made them all the best of friends.

The removal was accomplished two days after, Everard in the meantime making an expedition to that metropolitan place, Thun, which they all felt to be a greater emporium of luxury than London or Paris, and from which he brought a carriage full of comforts of every description to make up what might be wanting to Herbert's ease, and to their table, among the higher and more primitive hills. I cannot tell you how they travelled, dear reader, because I do not quite know which is the way—but they started from the Kanderthal in the big carriage Everard had brought from Thun, with all the people in the hotel out on the steps to watch them, and wave kindly farewells and call out to them friendly hopes for the invalid.

Madame de Mirfleur cried, and sobbed, and smiled, and waved her handkerchief from her own carriage, which accompanied theirs a little bit of the way, when the moment of parting came. Her mind was satisfied when she saw Julie safe on the banquette by François'

side. Julie was a kind Frenchwoman of five-and-thirty, very indulgent to the young people, who were still children to her, and whom she had spoilt in her day. She had wept to think she was not going back to Babette, but had dried her eyes on contemplating Reine. And the young party themselves were not alarmed by Julie. They made great capital of Herbert's joke, which was not perhaps quite so witty as they all thought; and thus went off, with more youthful tumult, smiles, and excitement than the brother and sister had known for years, to the valleys of the High Alps and all the unknown things—life or death, happiness or misery—that might be awaiting them in those unknown regions. It would perhaps be wrong to say that they went without fear of one kind or another; but the fear had a thrill in it which was almost as good as joy.

CHAPTER V.

THE news of Herbert's second rally, and the hopeful state in which he was, did not create so great a sensation among his relations as the first had done. The people who were not so deeply interested as Reine, and to whom his life or death was of secondary importance, nevertheless shared something of her feeling. He was no longer a creature brought up from the edge of the grave, miraculously or semi-miraculously restored to life and hope, but a sick man fallen back again into the common conditions of nature, varying as others vary, now better, now worse, and probably as all had made up their mind to his death, merely showing, with perhaps more force than usual, the well-known uncertainty of consumptive patients, blazing up in the socket with an effort which, though repeated, was still a last effort, and had no real hopefulness in it. This they all thought, from Miss Susan, who wished for his recovery, to Mr. Farrel-Austin, whose wishes were exactly the reverse.

They wished, and they did not wish, that he might get better; but they no longer believed in it as possible. Even Augustine paused in her absolute faith, and allowed a faint wonder to cross her mind as to what was meant by this strange dispensation. She asked to have some sign given her whether or not to go on praying for Herbert's restoration.

"It might be that this was a token to ask no more," she said to Dr. Richard, who was somewhat scandalised by the suggestion. "If it is not intended to save him, this may be a sign that his name should be mentioned no longer."

Dr. Richard, though he was not half so truly confident as Augustine was in the acceptability of her bedesmen's and bedeswomen's prayers, was yet deeply shocked by this idea. "So long as I am chaplain at the Almshouses, so long shall the poor boy be commended to God in every litany I say!" he declared with energy, firm as ever in his duty and the church's laws. It was dreadful to him, Dr. Richard said, to be thus as it were subordinate to a lady, liable to her suggestions, which were contrary to every rubric, though, indeed, he never took them. "I suffer much from having these suggestions made to me, though I thank God I have never

given in—never! and never will!" said the old chaplain, with tremulous heroism. He bemoaned himself to his wife, who believed in him heartily, and comforted him, and to Miss Susan, who gave him a short answer, and to the vicar, who chuckled and was delighted.

"I always thought it was an odd position," he said, "but of course you knew when you entered upon it how you would be." This was all the consolation he got except from his wife, who always entered into his feelings, and stood by him on every occasion with her smelling-salts. And the more Miss Augustine thought that it was unnecessary to pray further for her nephew, the more clearly Dr. Richard enunciated his name every time that the litany was said. The Almshouses sided with the doctor, I am bound to add, in this, if not in the majority of subjects; and old Mrs. Matthews was one of the chief of his partizans, "for while there is life there is hope," she justly said.

But while they were thus thrown back from their first hopes about Herbert, Miss Susan was surprised one night by another piece of information, to her as exciting as anything about him could be. She had gone to her room one August night rather earlier than usual, though the hours kept by the household at Whiteladies were

always early. Martha had gone to bed in the anteroom, where she slept within call of her mistress, and all the house, except Miss Susan herself, was stilled in slumber. Miss Susan sat wrapped in her dressing-gown, reading before she went to bed, as it had always been her habit to do. She had a choice of excellent books for this purpose on a little shelf at the side of her bed, each with markers in it to keep the place. They were not all religious literature, but good "sound reading" books, of the kind of which a little goes a long way. She was seated with one of these excellent volumes on her knee, perhaps because she was thinking over what she had just read, perhaps because her attention had flagged. Her attention, it must be allowed, had lately flagged a good deal, since she had an absorbing subject of thought, and she had taken to novels and other light reading, to her considerable disgust, finding that these trifling productions had more power of distracting her from her own contemplations than works more worth studying. She was seated thus, as I have said, in the big easy-chair, with her feet on a footstool, her dressing-gown wrapping her in its large and loose folds, and her lamp burning clear on the little table—with her book on her lap, not reading, but thinking—when all at

once her ear was caught by the sound of a horse galloping heavily along the somewhat heavy road. It was not later than half-past ten when this happened, but half-past ten was a very late hour in the parish of St. Augustin. Miss Susan knew at once, by intuition, the moment she heard the sound, that this laborious messenger, floundering along upon his heavy steed, was coming to her. Her heart began to beat. Whiteladies was at some distance from a telegraph station, and she had before now received news in this way. She opened her window softly and looked out. It was a dark night, raining hard, cold and comfortless. She listened to the hoofs coming steadily, noisily along, and waited till the messenger appeared, as she felt sure he would, at the door. Then she went down-stairs quickly, and undid the bolts and bars, and received the telegram. "Thank you; good night," she said to him, mechanically, not knowing what she was about, and stumbling again up the dark, oaken staircase, which creaked under her foot, and where a ghost was said to "walk." Miss Susan herself, though she was not superstitious, did not like to turn her head towards the door of the glazed passage, which led to the old play-room and the musicians' gallery. Her heart felt sick and faint within her: she

believed that she held the news of Herbert's death in her hand, though she had no light to read it, and if Herbert himself had appeared to her, standing wan and terrible at that door, she would not have felt surprised. Her own room was in a disorder which she could not account for when she reached it again and shut the door, for it did not at first occur to her that she had left the window wide open, letting in the wind—which had scattered her little paraphernalia about—and the rain which had made a great wet stain upon the old oak floor. She tore the envelope open, feeling more and more sick and faint, the chill of the night going through and through her, and a deeper chill in her heart. So deeply had one thought taken possession of her, that when she read the words in this startling missive, she could not at first make out what they meant. For it was not an intimation of death, but of birth. Miss Susan stared at it first, and then sat down in her chair and tried to understand what it meant. And this was what she read:—

"Dieu soit loué, un garçon. Né à deux heures et demi de l'après-midi ce 16 Août. Loué soit le bon Dieu."

Miss Susan could not move; her whole being seemed seized with cruel pain. "Praised be God. God be praised!" She gave a low cry, and fell on her knees by

her bedside. Was it to echo that ascription of praise? The night wind blew in and blew about the flame of the lamp and of the dim night-light in the other corner of the room, and the rain rained in, making a larger and larger circle, like a pool of blood on the floor. A huge shadow of Miss Susan flickered upon the opposite wall, cast by the waving lamp which was behind her. She lay motionless, now and then uttering a low, painful cry, with her face hid against the bed.

But this could not last. She got up after a while, and shut the window, and drew the curtains as before, and picked up the handkerchief, the letters, the little prayer-book, which the wind had tossed about, and put back her book on its shelf. She had no one to speak to, and she did not, you may suppose, speak to herself, though a strong impulse moved her to go and wake Martha; not that she could have confided in Martha, but only to have the comfort of a human face to look at, and a voice to say something to her, different from that "Dieu soit loué—loué soit le bon Dieu," which seemed to ring in her ears. But Miss Susan knew that Martha would be cross if she were roused, and that no one in the peaceful house would do more than stare at this information she had received; no one would take the least interest in it

for itself, and no one, no one! could tell what it was to her. She was very cold, but she could not go to bed; the hoofs of the horse receding into the distance seemed to keep echoing into her ears long after they must have got out of hearing; every creak of the oaken boards, as she walked up and down, seemed to be a voice calling to her. And how the old boards creaked! like so many spectators, ancestors, old honourable people of the house, crowding round to look at the one who had brought dishonour into it. Miss Susan had met with no punishment for her wicked plan up to this time. It had given her excitement, nothing more; but now the deferred penalty had come. She walked about on the creaking boards afraid of them, and terrified at the sound, in such a restless anguish as I cannot describe. Up to this time kind chance, or gracious Providence, might have made her conspiracy null; but neither God nor accident (how does a woman who has done wrong know which word to use?) had stepped in to help her. And now it was irremediable, past her power or any one's to annul the evil. And the worst of all was those words which the old man in Bruges, who was her dupe and not her accomplice, had repeated in his innocence, that the name of the new-born might have God's name

on either side to protect it. "*Dieu soit loué!*" she repeated to herself, shuddering. She seemed to hear it repeated all round, not piously, but mockingly, shouted at her by eldritch voices. "Praised be God! God be praised!" for what? for the accomplishment of a lie, a cheat, a conspiracy! Miss Susan's limbs trembled under her. She could not tell how it was that the vengeance of heaven did not fall and crush the old house which had never before sheltered such a crime. But Augustine was asleep, praying in her sleep like an angel, under the same old roof, offering up continual adorations, innocent worship for the expiation of some visionary sins which nobody knew anything of; would they answer for the wiping away of her sister's sin which was so real? Miss Susan walked up and down all the long night. She lay down on her bed towards morning, chiefly that no one might see how deeply agitated she had been, and when Martha got up at the usual hour asked for a cup of tea to restore her a little. "I have not been feeling quite well," said Miss Susan, to anticipate any remarks as to her wan looks.

"So I was afraid, miss," said Martha, "but I thought as you'd call me if you wanted anything." This lukewarm devotion made Miss Susan smile.

Notwithstanding all her sufferings, however, she wrote a letter to Mr. Farrel-Austin that morning, and sent it by a private messenger, enclosing her telegram, so undeniably genuine, with a few accompanying words. "I am afraid you will not be exhilarated by this intelligence," she wrote, "though I confess for my part it gives me pleasure, as continuing the family in the old stock. But anyhow, I feel it is my duty to forward it to you. It is curious to think," she added, "that but for your kind researches, I might never have found out these Austins of Bruges." This letter Miss Susan sealed with her big Whiteladies seal, and enclosed the telegram in a large envelope. And she went about all her ordinary occupations that day, and looked and even felt very much as usual. "I had rather a disturbed night, and could not sleep," she said, by way of explanation of the look of exhaustion she was conscious of. And she wrote to old Guillaume Austin of Bruges a very kind and friendly letter, congratulating him, and hoping that, if she had the misfortune to lose her nephew (who, however, she was very happy to tell him, was much better), his little grandson might long and worthily fill the place of master of Whiteladies. It was a letter which old Guillaume translated with infinite care and some use

of the dictionary, not only to his family, but also to his principal customers, astonishing them by the news of his good fortune. To be sure his poor Gertrude, his daughter, was mourning the loss of her baby, born on the same day as his daughter-in-law's fine boy, but which had not survived its birth. She was very sad about it, poor child; but still that was a sorrow which would glide imperceptibly away, while this great joy and pride and honour would remain.

I need not tell how Mr. Farrel-Austin tore his hair. He received his cousin Susan's intimation of the fact that it was he who had discovered the Austins of Bruges for her with an indescribable dismay and rage, and showed the telegram to his wife, grinding his teeth at her. "Every poor wretch in the world—except you!" he cried, till poor Mrs. Farrel-Austin shrank and wept. There was nothing he would not have done to show his rage and despite, but he could do nothing except bully his wife and his servants. His daughters were quite matches for him, and would not be bullied. They were scarcely interested in the news of a new heir. "Herbert being better, what does it matter?" said Kate and Sophy. "I could understand you being in a state of mind about him. It *is* hard, after calculating upon the

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property, to have him get better in spite of you," said one of these young ladies, with the frankness natural to her kind, "but what does it matter now if there were a whole regiment of babies in the way? Isn't a miss as good as a mile?" This philosophy did not affect the wrathful and dissatisfied man, who had no faith in Herbert's recovery—but it satisfied the girls, who thought papa was getting really too bad; yet, as they managed to get most things they wanted, were not particularly impressed even by the loss of Whiteladies. "What with Herbert getting better and this new baby, whoever it is, I suppose old Susan will be in great fig," the one sister said. "I wish them joy of their old tumble-down hole of a place," said the other; and so their lament was made for the vanished hope.

Thus life passed on with all the personages involved in this history. The only other incident that happened just then was one which concerned the little party in Switzerland. Everard was summoned home in haste, when he had scarcely done more than escort his cousins to their new quarters, and so that little romance, if it had ever been likely to come to a romance, was nipped in the bud. He had to come back about business, which with the unoccupied and moderately rich, means

almost invariably bad fortune. His money, not too much to start with, had been invested in doubtful hands; and when he reached England he found that he had lost half of it by the delinquency of a manager who had run away with his money, and that of a great many people besides. Everard, deprived at a blow of half his income, was fain to take the first employment that offered, which was a mission to the West Indies, to look after property there, partly his own, partly belonging to his fellow-sufferers, which had been allowed to drop into that specially hopeless Slough of Despond which seems natural to West Indian affairs. He went away, poor fellow, feeling that life had changed totally for him, and leaving behind both the dreams and the reality of existence. His careless days were all over. What he had to think of now was how to save the little that remained to him, and do his duty by the others who, on no good grounds, only because he had been energetic and ready, had intrusted their interests to him. Why they should have trusted him, who knew nothing of business, and whose only qualification was that gentlemanly vagabondage which is always ready to go off to the end of the world at a moment's notice, Everard could not tell; but he meant to do his best, if only to

secure some other occupation for himself when this job was done.

This was rather a sad interruption, in many ways, to the young man's careless life; and they all felt it as a shock. He left Herbert under the pine-trees, weak but hopeful, looking as if any breeze might make an end of him, so fragile was he, the soul shining through him almost visibly, yet an air of recovery about him which gave all lookers-on a tremulous confidence; and Reine, with moisture in her eyes which she did not try to conceal, and an ache in her heart which she did conceal, but poorly. Everard had taken his cousin's privilege, and kissed her on the forehead when he went away, trying not to think of the deep blush which surged up to the roots of her hair. But poor Reine saw him go with a pang which she could disclose to nobody, and which at first seemed to fill her heart too full of pain to be kept down. She had not realised, till he was gone, how great a place he had taken in her little world; and the surprise was as great as the pain. How dreary the valley looked, how lonely her life when his carriage drove away down the hill to the world! How the Alpine heights seemed to close in, and the very sky to contract! Only a few days before, when they arrived, everything

had looked so different. Now, even the friendly tourists of the Kanderthal would have been some relief to the dead blank of solitude which closed over Reine. She had her brother, as always, to nurse and care for, and watch daily and hourly on his passage back to life, and many were the forlorn moments when she asked herself what did she want more? what had she ever desired more? Many and many a day had Reine prayed, and pledged herself in her prayers, to be contented with anything, if Herbert was but spared to her; and now Herbert was spared and getting better—yet lo! she was miserable. The poor girl had a tough battle to fight with herself in that lonely Swiss valley, but she stood to her arms, even when capable of little more, and kept up her courage so heroically, that when for the first time Herbert wrote a little note to Everard as he had promised, he assured the traveller that he had scarcely missed him, Reine had been so bright and so kind. When Reine read this little letter she felt a pang of mingled pain and pleasure. She had not betrayed herself. "But it is a little unkind to Everard to say I have been so bright since his going," she said, feeling her voice thick with tears. "Oh, he will not mind," said Herbert lightly, "and you know it is true. After all, though he was a

delightful companion, there is nothing so sweet as being by ourselves," the sick boy added with undoubting confidence. "Oh, what a trickster I am!" poor Reine said to herself; and she kissed him, and told him that she hoped he would think so always, always! which Herbert promised in sheer lightness of heart.

And thus we leave this helpless pair, like the rest, to themselves for a time; Herbert to get better as he could, Reine to fight her battle out, and win it so far, and recover the calm of use and wont. Eventually the sky widened to her, and the hills drew farther off, and the oppression loosened from her heart. She took Herbert to Italy in October, still mending; and wrote long and frequent letters about him to Whiteladies, boasting of his walks and increasing strength, and promising that next summer he should go home. I don't want the reader to think that Reine had altogether lost her heart during this brief episode. It came back to her after a while, having been only vagrant, errant, as young hearts will be by times. She had but learned to know, for the first time in her life, what a difference happens in this world according to the presence or absence of one being; how such a one can fill up the space and pervade the atmosphere; and how, suddenly going, he seems to

carry everything away with him. Her battle and struggle and pain were half owing to the shame and distress with which she found out that a man could do this, and had done it, though only for a few days, to herself; leaving her in a kind of blank despair when he was gone. But she got rid of this feeling (or thought she did), and the world settled back into its right proportions, and she said to herself that she was again her own mistress. Yet there were moments, when the stars were shining, when the twilight was falling, when the moon was up—or sometimes in the very heat of the day, when a sensible young woman has no right to give way to folly—when Reine all at once would feel not her own mistress, and the world again would all melt away to make room for one shadow. As the winter passed, however, she got the better of this sensation daily, she was glad to think. To be sure there was no reason why she should not think of Everard if she liked; but her main duty was to take care of Herbert, and to feel once more, if she could, as she had once felt, and as she still professed to feel, poor child, in her prayers, that if Herbert only lived she would ask for nothing more.

CHAPTER VI.

ABOUT two years after the events I have just described, in the autumn, when life was low and dreary at Whiteladies, a new and unexpected visitor arrived at the old house. Herbert and his sister had not come home that summer as they had hoped—nor even the next. He was better, almost out of the doctor's hands, having taken, it was evident, a new lease of life. But he was not strong, nor could ever be; his life, though renewed, and though it might now last for years, could never be anything but that of an invalid. So much all his advisers had granted. He might last as long as any of the vigorous persons round him, by dint of care and constant watchfulness; but it was not likely that he could ever be a strong man like others, or that he could live without taking care of himself, and being taken care of. This, which they would all have hailed with gratitude while he was very ill, seemed but a pale kind of blessedness now when it was assured, and

when it became certain that his existence must be spent in thinking about his health, in moving from one place to another as the season went on, according as this place or the other "agreed with him," seeking the cool in summer and the warmth in winter, with no likelihood of ever being delivered from this bondage. He had scarcely found this out himself, poor fellow, but still entertained hopes of getting strong, at some future moment always indefinitely postponed. He had not been quite strong enough to venture upon England during the summer, much as he had looked forward to it; and though in the meantime he had come of age and nominally assumed the control of his own affairs, the celebration of this coming of age had been a dreary business enough. Farrel-Austin, looking as black as night, and feeling himself a man swindled and cheated out of his rights, had been present at the dinner of the tenantry, in spite of himself, and with sentiments towards Herbert which may be divined; and with only such dismal pretence at delight as could be shown by the family solicitor, whose head was full of other things, the rejoicings had passed over. There had been a great field-day, indeed, at the Almshouse chapel, where the old people with their cracked voices tried to chant

the twentieth and twenty-first Psalms, and were much bewildered in their old souls as to who "the king" might be, whose desire of his heart they thus prayed God to grant. Mrs. Matthews alone, who was more learned theologically than her neighbours, having been brought up a Methody, professed to some understanding of it; but even she was wonderfully confused between King David and a greater than he, and poor young Herbert whose birthday it was. "He may be the squire, if you please, and if so be as he lives," said old Sarah, who was Mrs. Matthews's rival, "many's the time I've nursed him, and carried him about in my arms, and who should know if I don't? But there ain't no power in this world as can make young Mr. Herbert king o' England, so long as the Prince o' Wales is to the fore, and the rest o' them. If Miss Augustine was to swear to it, I knows better; and you can tell her that from me."

"He can't be king o' England," said Mrs. Matthews, "neither me nor Miss Augustine thinks of anything of the kind. It's awful to see such ignorance o' spiritual meanings. What's the Bible but spiritual meanings? You oughtn't to take the blessed word right off according to what it says."

"That's the difference between you and me," said

old Sarah boldly. "I does; and I hope I practise my Bible, instead of turning of it off into any kind of meanings. I've always heard as that was one of the differences atween Methodies and good steady church folks."

"Husht, husht, here's the doctor a-coming," said old Mrs. Tolladay, who kept the peace between the parties, but liked to tell the story of their conflicts afterwards to any understanding ear. "I dun-no much about how Mr. Herbert, poor lad, could be the king myself," she said to the vicar, who was one of her frequent auditors, and who dearly liked a joke about the Almshouses, which were a kind of *imperium in imperio*, a separate principality within his natural dominions; "but Miss Augustine warn't meaning that. If she's queer, she aint a rebel nor nothing o' that sort, but says her prayers for the queen regular, like the rest of us. As for meanings, Tolladay says to me, we've no call to go searching for meanings like them two, but just to do what we're told, as is the whole duty of man, me and Tolladay says. As for them two, they're as good as a play. 'King David was 'im as had all his desires granted 'im, and long life, and help out o' Sion,' said Mrs. Matthews. 'And a nice person he was to have all his wants!' says

old Sarah. 'I'd ha' shut my door pretty fast in the man's face if he'd come here asking help, I can tell you. Call him a king if you please, but I calls him no better nor the rest—a-peepin' and a-spyin'——'"

"What did she mean by that?" asked the vicar, amused but wondering.

"'Cause of the woman as was a-washing of herself, sir," said Mrs. Tolladay, modestly looking down. "Sarah can't abide him for that; but I says as maybe it was a strange sight so long agone. Folks wasn't so thoughtful of washings and so forth in old times. When I was in service myself, which is a good bit since, there wasn't near the fuss about baths as there is nowadays, not even among the gentlefolks. Says Mrs. Matthews, 'He was a man after God's own heart, he was.' 'I ain't a-going to find fault with my Maker, it ain't my place,' says Sarah; 'but I don't approve o' his taste.' And that's as true as I stand here. She's a bold woman, is old Sarah. There's many as might think it, but few as would say it. Anyhow, I can't get it out o' my mind as it was somehow Mr. Herbert as we was a-chanting of, and never King David. Poor man, he's dead this years and years," said Mrs. Tolladay, "and you know, as well as me, sir, that there are no devices nor labours

found, nor wisdom, as the hymn says, underneath the ground."

"Well, Mrs. Tolladay," said the vicar, who had laughed his laugh out, and bethought himself of what was due to his profession, "let us hope that young Mr. Austin's desires will all be good ones, and that so we may pray God to give them to him, without anything amiss coming of it."

"That's just what I say, sir," said Mrs. Tolladay, "it's for all the world like the toast as used to be the fashion in my young days, when folks drank not to your health, as they do now, but to your wishes, if so be as they were vartuous. Many a time that's been done to me, when I was a young girl; and I am sure," she added with a curtsey, taking the glass of wine with which the vicar usually rewarded the amusement her gossip gave him, "as I may say that to you and not be afraid; I drinks to your wishes, sir."

"As long as they are virtuous," said the vicar laughing; and for a long time after he was very fond of retailing old Sarah's difference of opinion with her Maker, which perhaps the gentle reader may have heard attributed to a much more important person.

Miss Susan gave the almshouse people a great supper

in the evening, at which I am grieved to say old John Simmons had more beer than was good for him, and volunteered a song, to the great horror of the chaplain and the chaplain's wife, and many spectators from the village who had come to see the poor old souls enjoying this unusual festivity. "Let him sing if he likes," old Sarah cried, who was herself a little jovial. "It's something for you to tell, you as comes a-finding fault and a-prying at poor old folks enjoying themselves once in a way." "Let them stare," said Mrs. Matthews, for once backing up her rival; "it'll do 'em good to see that we ain't wild beasts a-feeding, but poor folks as well off as rich folks, which ain't common." "No it ain't, missis; you're right there," said the table by general consent; and after this the spectators slunk away. But I am obliged to admit that John Simmons was irrepressible, and groaned out a verse of song which ran away into a deplorable chorus, in which several of the old men joined, in the elation of their hearts—but by means of their wives and other authorities suffered for it next day.

Thus Herbert's birthday passed without Herbert, who was up among the pines again, breathing in their odours and getting strong, as they all said, though not strong enough to come home. Herbert enjoyed this lazy and

languid existence well enough, poor fellow; but Reine, since that prick of fuller and warmer life came momentarily to her, had not enjoyed it. She had lost her pretty colour, except at moments when she was excited, and her eyes had grown bigger, and had that wistful look in them which comes when a girl has begun to look out into the world from her little circle of individuality, and to wonder what real life is like, with a longing to try its dangers. In a boy, this longing is the best thing that can be, inspiriting him to exertion; but in a girl, what shape can it take but a longing for some one who will open the door of living to her, and lead her out into the big world, of which girls too, like boys, form such exaggerated hopes? Reine was not thinking of any one in particular, she said to herself often; but her life had grown just a little weary to her, and felt small and limited and poor, and as if it must go on in the same monotony for ever and ever. There came a nameless, restless sense upon her of looking for something that might happen at any moment, which is the greatest mental trouble young women have to encounter, who are obliged to be passive, not active, in settling their own fate. I remember hearing a high-spirited and fanciful girl, who had been dreadfully sobered by her

plunge into marriage, declare the chief advantage of that condition to be—that you had no longer any restlessness of expectation, but had come down to reality, and knew all that was ever to come of you, and at length could fathom at once the necessity and the philosophy of content. This is perhaps rather a dreary view to take of the subject; but, however, Reine was in the troublous state of expectation, which this young woman declared to be thus put an end to. She was as a young man often is, whose friends keep him back from active occupation, wondering whether this flat round was to go on for ever, or whether next moment, round the next corner, there might not be something waiting which would change her whole life.

As for Miss Susan and her sister, they went on living at Whiteladies as of old. The management of the estate had been, to some extent, taken out of Miss Susan's hands at Herbert's majority, but as she had done everything for it for years, and knew more about it than anybody else, she was still so much consulted and referred to that the difference was scarcely more than in name. Herbert had written "a beautiful letter" to his aunts when he came of age, begging them not so much as to think of any change, and declaring that even were he

able to come home, Whiteladies would not be itself to him unless the dear White ladies of his childhood were in it as of old. "That is all very well," said Miss Susan, "but if he gets well enough to marry, poor boy, which pray God he may, he will want his house to himself." Augustine took no notice at all of the matter. To her it was of no importance where she lived; a room in the Almshouses would have pleased her as well as the most sumptuous chamber, so long as she was kept free from all domestic business, and could go and come, and muse and pray as she would. She gave the letter back to her sister without a word on its chief subject. "His wife should be warned of the curse that is on the house," she said with a soft sigh; and that was all.

"The curse, Austine!" said Miss Susan with a little shiver. "You have turned it away, dear, if it ever existed. How can you speak of a curse when this poor boy is spared, and is going to live?"

"It is not turned away, it is only suspended," said Augustine. "I feel it still hanging like a sword over us. If we relax in our prayers, in our efforts to make up, as much as we can, for the evil done, any day it may fall."

Miss Susan shivered once more; a tremulous chill ran

over her. She was much the stronger, much the more sensible of the two; but what has that to do with such a question? especially with the consciousness she had in her heart. This consciousness, however, had been getting lighter and lighter, as Herbert grew stronger and stronger. She had sinned, but God was so good to her that He was making her sin of no effect, following her wickedness, to her great joy, not by shame or exposure, as He might so well have done, but by his blessing which neutralised it altogether. Thinking over it for all these many days, now that it seemed likely to do no practical harm to any one, perhaps it was not, after all, so great a sin. Three people only were involved in the guilt of it; and the guilt, after all, was but a deception. Deceptions are practised everywhere, often even by good people, Miss Susan argued with herself; and this was one which, at present, could scarcely be said to harm anybody, and which, even in the worst of circumstances, was not an actual turning away of justice, but rather a lawless righting, by means of a falsehood, of a legal wrong which was false to nature. Casuistry is a science which it is easy to learn. The most simple minds become adepts in it; the most virtuous persons find a refuge there when necessity moves them. Talk

of Jesuitry! as if this art was not far more universal than that maligned body, spreading where they were never heard of, and lying close to every one of us! As time went on Miss Susan might have taken a degree in it—mistress of the art—though there was nobody who knew her in all the country round, who would not have sworn by her straightforwardness and downright truth and honour. And what with this useful philosophy, and what with Herbert's recovery, the burden had gone off her soul gradually; and by this time she had so put her visit to Bruges, and the telegrams and subsequent letters she had received on the same subject out of her mind, that it seemed to her, when she thought of it, like an uneasy dream, which she was glad to forget, but which had no more weight than a dream upon her living and the course of events. She had been able to deal Farrel-Austin a good downright blow by means of it; and though Miss Susan was a good woman, she was not sorry for that. And all the rest had come to nothing—it had done no harm to any one, at least, no harm to speak of—nothing that had not been got over long ago. Old Austin's daughter, Gertrude, the fair young matron whom Miss Susan had seen at Bruges, had already had another baby, and no doubt had forgotten the little one

she lost; and the little boy, who was Herbert's heir presumptive, was the delight and pride of his grandfather and of all the house. So what harm was done? The burden grew lighter and lighter, as she asked herself this question, at Miss Susan's heart.

One day in this autumn there came, however, as I have said, a change and interruption to these thoughts. It was October, and though there is no finer month sometimes in our changeable English climate, October can be chill enough when it pleases, as all the world knows. It was not a time of the year favourable, at least when the season was wet, to the country about Whiteladies. To be sure, the wealth of trees took on lovely tints of autumn colours when you could see them; but when it rained day after day, as it did that season, every wood and byway was choked up with fallen leaves; the gardens were all strewn with them; the heaviness of decaying vegetation was in the air; and everything looked dismal, ragged, and worn out. The very world seemed going to pieces, rending off its garments piecemeal, and letting them rot at its melancholy feet. The rain poured down out of the heavy skies as if it would never end. The night fell soon on the ashamed and pallid day. The gardener at Whiteladies swept his lawn

all day long, but never got clear of those rags and scraps of foliage which every wind loosened. Berks was like a dissipated old young man, worn out before his time. On one of those dismal evenings Augustine was coming from the evening service at the Almshouses in the dark, just before nightfall. With her grey hood over her head, and her hands folded into her great grey sleeves, she looked like a ghost gliding through the perturbed and ragged world; but she was a comfortable ghost, her peculiar dress suiting the season. As she came along the road, for the byway through the fields was impassable, she saw before her another shrouded figure, not grey as she was, but black, wrapped in a great hooded cloak, and stumbling forward against the rain and wind. I will not undertake to say that Augustine's visionary eyes noticed her closely; but any unfamiliar figure makes itself remarked on a country road, where generally every figure is most familiar. This woman was unusually tall, and she was evidently a stranger. She carried a child in her arms, and stopped at every house and at every turning to look eagerly about her, as if looking for something or some one, in a strange place. She went along more and more slowly till Augustine walking on, in her uninterrupted steady

way, turning neither to the right nor to the left hand, came up to her. The stranger had seen her coming; and, I suppose, Augustine's dress had awakened hopes of succour in her mind, bearing some resemblance to the religious garb which was well known to her. At length when the leafy road which led to the side door of Whiteladies struck off from the highway bewildering her utterly, she stood still at the corner, and waited for the approach of the other wayfarer, the only one visible in all this silent, rural place. "Ma sœur!" she said softly, to attract her attention. Then touching Augustine's long grey sleeve, stammered in English, "I lost my way. Ma sœur, aidez-moi pour l'amour de Dieu!"

"You are a stranger," said Augustine; "you want to find some one? I will help you if I can. Where is it you want to go?"

The woman looked at her searchingly, which was but a trick of her imperfect English, to make out by study of her face and lips, as well as by hearing, what she said. Her child began to cry, and she hushed it impatiently, speaking roughly to the curiously-dressed creature, which had a little cap of black stuff closely tied down under its chin. Then she said once more, employing the name evidently as a talisman to secure

attention, "Ma sœur! I want Viteladies; can you tell me where it is?"

"Whiteladies!"

"That is the name. I am very fatigued, and a stranger, ma sœur."

"If you are very fatigued and a stranger, you shall come to Whiteladies, whatever you want there," said Augustine. "I am going to the house now; come with me—by this way."

She turned into Priory Lane, the old avenue, where they were soon ankle-deep in fallen leaves. The child wailed on the woman's shoulder, and she shook it, lightly indeed, but harshly. "Tais-toi donc, petit sot!" she said sharply; then turning with the ingratiating tone she had used before, "We are very fatigued, ma sœur. We have come over the sea. I know little English. What I have learn, I learn all by myself, that no one know. I come to London, and then to Viteladies. It is a long way."

"And why do you want to come to Whiteladies?" said Augustine. "It was a strange place to think of—though I will never send a stranger and a tired person away without food and rest, at least. But what has brought you here?"

"Ah! I must not tell it, my story; it is a strange story. I come to see one old lady, who other times did come to see me. She will not know me, perhaps; but she will know my name. My name is like her own. It is Austin, ma sœur."

"Osteng?" said Augustine, struck with surprise; "that is not my name. Ah, you are French, to be sure. You mean Austin? You have the same name as we have; who are you, then? I have never seen you before."

"You, ma sœur! but it was not you. It was a lady more stout, more large, not religious. Ah, no, not you; but another. There are perhaps many lady in the house?"

"It may be my sister you mean," said Augustine; and she opened the gate and led up to the porch, where on this wet and chilly day there was no token of the warm inhabited look it bore in summer. There was scarcely any curiosity roused in her mind, but a certain pity for the tired creature whom she took in, opening the door, as Christabel took in the mysterious lady. "There is a step, take care," said Augustine holding out her hand to the stranger, who grasped at it to keep herself from stumbling. It was almost dark, and the

glimmer from the casement of the long many-cornered passage, with its red floor, scarcely gave light enough to make the way visible. "Ah, merci, ma sœur!" said the stranger, "I shall not forget that you have brought me in, when I was fatigued and nearly dead."

"Do not thank me," said Augustine; "if you know my sister you have a right to come in; but I always help the weary; do not thank me. I do it to take away the curse from the house."

The stranger did not know what she meant, but stood by her in the dark, drawing a long hard breath, and staring at her with dark mysterious, almost menacing, eyes.

CHAPTER VII.

"HERE is some one, Susan, who knows you," said Augustine, introducing the new-comer into the drawing-room where her sister sat. It was a wainscoted room, very handsome and warm in its brown panelling, in which the firelight shone reflected. There was a bright fire, and the room doubled itself by means of a large mirror over the mantel-piece, antique like the house, shining out of black wood and burnished brass. Miss Susan sat by the fire with her knitting, framing one of those elaborate meshes of casuistry which I have already referred to. The table close by her was heaped with books, drawings for the chantry, and for the improvement of an old house in the neighbourhood which she had bought in order to be independent, whatever accidents might happen. She was more tranquil than usual in the quiet of her thoughts, having made an effort to dismiss the more painful subject altogether, and to think only of the immediate future as it appeared now

in the light of Herbert's recovery. She was thinking how to improve the house she had bought, which at present bore the unmeaning title of St. Augustin's Grange, and which she mirthfully announced her intention of calling Grey-womans, as a variation upon Whiteladies. Miss Susan was sixty, and pretended to no lingering of youthfulness: but she was so strong and full of life that nobody thought of her as an old woman, and though she professed, as persons of her age do, to have but a small amount of life left, she had no real feeling to this effect (as few have), and was thinking of her future house and planning conveniences for it as carefully as if she expected to live in it for a hundred years. If she had been doing this with the immediate prospect of leaving Whiteladies before her, probably she might have felt a certain pain; but as she had no idea of leaving Whiteladies, there was nothing to disturb the pleasure with which almost every mind plans and plots the arrangement of a house. It is one of the things which everybody likes to attempt, each of us having a confidence that we shall succeed in it. By the fire which felt so warmly pleasant in contrast with the greyness without, having just decided with satisfaction that it was late enough to have the lamp lighted, the curtains drawn,

and the greyness shut out altogether; and with the moral consolation about her of having got rid of her spectre, and of having been happily saved from all consequences of her wickedness, Miss Susan sat pondering her new house, and knitting her shawl, mind and hands alike occupied, and as near being happy as most women of sixty ever succeed in being. She turned round with a smile as Augustine spoke.

I cannot describe the curious shock and sense as of a stunning blow that came all at once upon her. She did not recognise the woman, whom she had scarcely seen, nor did she realise at all what was to follow. The stranger stood in the full light, throwing back the hood of her cloak which had been drawn over her bonnet. She was very tall, slight, and dark. Who was she? It was easier to tell what she was. No one so remarkable in appearance had entered the old house for years. She was not pretty or handsome only, but beautiful, with fine features and great dark, flashing, mysterious eyes; not a creature to be overlooked or passed with slighting notice. Unconsciously as she looked at her Miss Susan rose to her feet in instinctive homage to her beauty, which was like that of a princess. Who was she? The startled woman could not tell, yet felt somehow, not

only that she knew her, but that she had known of her arrival all her life, and was prepared for it, although she could not tell what it meant. She stood up and faced her faltering, and said, "This lady—knows me? but, pardon me, I don't know you."

"Yes; it is this one," said the stranger. "You not know me, Madame? You see me at my beau-père's house at Bruges. Ah! you remember now. And this is your child," she said suddenly, with a significant smile, putting down the baby by Miss Susan's feet. "I have brought him to you."

"Ah!" Miss Susan said with a suppressed cry. She looked helplessly from one to the other for a moment, holding up her hands as if in appeal to all the world against this sudden and extraordinary visitor. "You are —Madame Austin," she said still faltering, "their son's wife? Yes. Forgive me for not knowing you. And I hope," she added, not knowing what she said, "I hope —you are better now?"

"Yes, I am well," said the young woman, sitting down abruptly. The child, which was about two years old, gave a crow of delight at sight of the fire, and crept towards it instantly on his hands and knees. Both the baby and the mother seemed to take possession at once

of the place. She began to undo and throw back on Miss Susan's pretty velvet-covered chairs her wet cloak, and taking off her bonnet laid it on the table, on the plans of the new house. The boy, for his part, dragged himself over the great soft rug to the fender, where he sat down triumphant, holding his baby hands to the fire. His cap, which was made like a little nightcap of black stuff, with a border of coarse white lace very full round his face, such as French and Flemish children wear, was a headdress worn in-doors and out-of-doors, and not to be taken off—but he kicked himself free of the shawl in which he had been enveloped on his way to the fender. Augustine stood in her abstract way behind, not noticing much and waiting only to see if anything was wanted of her ; while Miss Susan, deeply agitated, and not knowing what to say or do, stood also, dispossessed, looking from the child to the woman and from the woman to the child.

"You have come from Bruges?" she said, rousing herself to talk a little, yet in such a confusion of mind that she did not know what she said. "You have had bad weather, unfortunately. You speak English? My French is so bad that I am glad of that."

"I know ver' little," said the stranger. "I have

learn all alone, that nobody might know. I have planned it for long time to get a little change. Enfant, tais-toi; he is bad; he is disagreeable; but it is to you he owes his existence, and I have brought him to you."

"You do not mean to give him a bad character, poor little thing," Miss Susan said with a forced smile. "Take care, take care, baby!"

"He will not take care. He likes to play with fire, and he does not understand you," said the woman, with almost a look of pleasure. Miss Susan seized the child and, drawing him away from the fender, placed him on the rug; and then the house echoed with a lusty cry, that startling cry of childhood which is so appalling to the solitary. Miss Susan, desperate and dismayed, tried what she could to amend her mistake. She took the handsomest book on the table in her agitation and thrust its pictures at him; she essayed to take him on her lap; she rushed to a cabinet and got out some curiosities to amuse him. "Dear, dear! cannot you pacify him?" she said at last. Augustine had turned away and gone out of the room, which was a relief.

"He does not care for me," said the woman with a smile, leaning back in her chair and stretching out her feet to the fire. "Sometimes he will scream only when

he catches sight of me. I brought him to you;—his aunt," she added meaningly, "Madame knows?—Gertrude, who lost her baby—can manage him, but not me. He is your child, Madame of the Viteladies. I bring him to you."

"Oh heaven help me! heaven help me!" cried Miss Susan wringing her hands.

However, after a while the baby fell into a state of quiet, pondering something, and at last, overcome by the warmth, fell fast asleep, a deliverance for which Miss Susan was more thankful than I can say. "But he will catch cold in his wet clothes," she said bending over him, not able to shut out from her heart a thrill of natural kindness as she looked at the little flushed face surrounded by its closely tied cap, and the little sturdy fat legs thrust out from under his petticoats.

"Oh, nothing will harm him," said the mother, with again a laugh that rang harshly. She pushed the child a little aside with her foot, not for his convenience, but her own. "It is warm here," she added, "he likes it, and so do I."

Then there was a pause. The stranger eyed Miss Susan with a half-mocking, defiant look, and Miss Susan, disturbed and unhappy, looked at her, wondering what

had brought her, what her object was, and oh! when it would be possible to get her away!

"You have come to England—to see it?" she asked, "for pleasure? to visit your friends? or perhaps on business? I am surprised that you should have found an out-of-the-way place like this."

"I sought it," said the new-comer. "I found the name on a letter, and then in a book, and so got here. I have come to see *you*."

"It is very kind of you, I am sure," said Miss Susan, more and more troubled. "Do you know many people in England? We shall, of course, be very glad to have you for a little while, but Whiteladies is not—amusing—at this time of the year."

"I know nobody—but you," said the stranger again. She sat with her great eyes fixed upon Miss Susan, who faltered and trembled under their steady gaze, leaning back in her chair, stretching out her feet to the fire with the air of one entirely at home and determined to be comfortable. She never took her eyes from Miss Susan's face, and there was a slight smile on her lip.

"Listen," she said. "It was not possible any longer there. They always hated me. Whatever I said or did, it was wrong. They could not put me out, for others

would have cried shame. They quarrelled with me and scolded me, sometimes ten times in a day. Ah, yes. I was not a log of wood. I scolded too; and we all hated each other. But they love the child. So I thought to come away, and bring the child to you. It is you that have done it, and you should have it; and it is I, madame knows, that have the only right to dispose of it. It is I—you acknowledge that?"

Heaven and earth! was it possible that the woman meant anything like what she said? "You have had a quarrel with them," said Miss Susan, pretending to take it lightly, falling at every word into a tremor she could not restrain. "Ah! that happens sometimes, but fortunately it does not last. If I can be of any use to make it up, I will do anything I can."

As she spoke she tried to return, and to overcome, if possible, the steady gaze of the other; but this was not an effort of which Miss Susan was capable. The strange, beautiful creature, who looked like some being of a new species treading this unaccustomed soil, looked calmly at her and smiled again.

"No," she said, "you will keep me here; that will be change, what I lofe. I will know your friends. I will be as your daughter. You will not send me back to that

place where they hate me. I like this better. I will stay here, and be a daughter to you."

Miss Susan grew pale to her very lips; her sin had found her out. "You say so because you are angry," she said trembling; "but they are your friends; they have been kind to you. This is not really my house, but my nephew's, and I cannot pretend to have—any right to you; though what you say is very kind," she added with a shiver. "I will write to M. Austin, and you will pay us a short visit, for we are dull here—and then you will go back to your home. I know you would not like the life here."

"I shall try," said the stranger composedly. "I like a room like this and a warm, beautiful house; and you have many servants and are rich. Ah, madame must not be too modest. She *has* a right to me—and the child. She will be my second mother, I know it. I shall be very happy here."

Miss Susan trembled more and more. "Indeed, you are deceiving yourself," she said. "Indeed, I could not set myself against Mousheer Austin, your father-in-law. Indeed, indeed——"

"And indeed, indeed!" said her visitor. "Yes; you have the best right to the child. The child is yours—

and I cannot be separated from him. Am not I his mother?" she said, with a mocking light on her face, and laughed—a laugh which was in reality very musical and pleasant, but which sounded to Miss Susan like the laugh of a fiend.

And then there came a pause; for Miss Susan, at her wit's end, did not know what to say. The child lay with one little foot kicked out at full length, the other dimpled knee bent, his little face flushed in the fire-light, fast asleep at their feet; the wet shawl in which he had been wrapped steaming and smoking in the heat; and the tall, fine figure of the young woman, slim and graceful, thrown back in the easy-chair in absolute repose and comfort. Though Miss Susan stood on her own hearth, and these two were intruders, aliens, it was she who hesitated and trembled, and the other who was calm and full of easy good-humour. She lay back in her chair as if she had lived there all her life; she stretched herself out before the welcome fire; she smiled upon the mistress of the house with benign indifference. "You would not separate the mother and the child," she repeated. "That would be worse than to separate husband and wife."

Miss Susan wrung her hands in despair. "For a

little while I shall be—glad to have you," she said, putting force on herself; "for a—week or two—a fortnight. But for a longer time I cannot promise. I am going to leave this house."

"One house is like another to me," said the stranger. "I will go with you where you go. You will be good to me—and the child."

Poor Miss Susan! This second Ruth looked at her dismay unmoved, nay, with a certain air of half humorous amusement. She was not afraid of her, nor of being turned away. She held possession with the bold security of one who, she knows, cannot be rejected. "I shall not be dull or fatigued of you, for you will be kind; and where you go I will go," she repeated, in Ruth's very words; while Miss Susan's heart sank, sank into the very depths of despair. What could she do or say? Should she give up her resistance for the moment, and wait to see what time would bring forth? or should she, however difficult it was, stand out now at the beginning, and turn away the unwelcome visitor? At that moment, however, while she tried to make up her mind to the severest measures, a blast of rain came against the window, and moaned and groaned in the chimneys of the old house. To turn a woman and a

child out into such a night was impossible; they must stay at least till morning, whatever they did more.

"And I should like something to eat," said the stranger, stretching her arms above her head with natural but not elegant freedom, and distorting her beautiful face with a great yawn. "I am very fatigued; and then I should like to wash myself and rest."

"Perhaps it is too late to do anything else to-night," said Miss Susan, with a troubled countenance; "to-morrow we must talk further; and I think you will see that it will be better to go back where you are known —among your friends——"

"No, no; never go back!" she cried. "I will go where you go; that is, I will not change any more. I will stay with you—and the child."

Miss Susan rang the bell with an agitated hand, which conveyed strange tremors even to the sound of the bell, and let the kitchen, if not into her secret, at least into the knowledge that there was a secret, and something mysterious going on. Martha ran to answer the summons, pushing old Stevens out of the way. "If it's anything particular, it's me as my lady wants," Martha said, moved to double zeal by curiosity; and a more curious scene had never been seen by wondering eyes

of domestic at Whiteladies than that which Martha saw. The stranger lying back in her chair, yawning and stretching her arms; Miss Susan standing opposite, with black care upon her brow; and at their feet between them, roasting, as Martha said, in front of the fire, the rosy baby with its odd dress, thrown down like a bundle on the rug. Martha gave a scream at sight of the child. "Lord! it's a baby! and summun will tread on't!" she cried, with her eyes starting out of her head.

"Hold your tongue, you foolish woman," cried Miss Susan; "do you think I will tread on the child? It is sleeping, poor little thing. Go at once, and make ready the East room; light a fire, and make everything comfortable. This — lady — is going to stay all night."

"Yes—every night," interposed the visitor, with a smile.

"You hear what I say to you, Martha," said Miss Susan, seeing that her maid turned gaping to the other speaker. "The East room, directly; and there is a child's bed, isn't there, somewhere in the house?"

"Yes, sure, Miss Susan; Master Herbert's, as he had when he come first, and Miss Reine's, but that's bigger, as it's the one she slept in at ten years old, afore you

give her the little dressing-room; and then there's an old cradle——"

"I don't want a list of all the old furniture in the house," cried Miss Susan, cutting Martha short, "and get a bath ready and some food for the child. Everything is to be done to make—this lady—comfortable—for the night."

"Ah! I knew Madame would be a mother to me," cried the stranger, suddenly rising up, and folding her unwilling hostess in an unexpected and unwelcome embrace. Miss Susan, half-resisting, felt her cheek touch the new-comer's damp and somewhat rough black woollen gown with sensations which I cannot describe. Utter dismay took possession of her soul. The punishment of her sin had taken form and shape; it was no longer to be escaped from. What should she, what could she, do? She withdrew herself almost roughly from the hold of her captor, which was powerful enough to require an effort to get free, and shook her collar straight, and her hair, which had been deranged by this unexpected sign of affection. "Let every thing be got ready at once," she said, turning with peremptory tones to Martha, who had witnessed with much dismay and surprise her mistress's discomfiture. The wind sighed

and groaned in the great chimney, as if it sympathized with her trouble, and blew noisy blasts of rain against the windows. Miss Susan suppressed the thrill of hot impatience and longing to turn this new-comer to the door which moved her. It could not be done to-night. Nothing could warrant her in turning out her worst enemy to the mercy of the elements to-night.

That was the strangest night that had been passed in Whiteladies for years. The stranger dined with the ladies in the old hall, which astonished her, but which she thought ugly and cold. "It is a church; it is not a room," she said, with a shiver. "I do not like to eat in a church." Afterwards, however, when she saw Augustine sit down, whom she watched wonderingly, she sat down also. "If ma sœur does it, I may do it," she said. But she did a great many things at table which disgusted Miss Susan, who could think of nothing else but this strange intruder. She ate up her gravy with a piece of bread, pursuing the savoury liquid round her plate. She declined to allow her knife and fork to be changed, to the great horror of Stevens. She addressed that correct and high-class servant familiarly as "my friend"—translating faithfully from her natural tongue—and drawing him into the conversation, a

liberty which Stevens on his own account was not indisposed to take, but which he scorned to be led into by a stranger. Miss Susan breathed at last when her visitor was taken up-stairs to bed. She went with her solemnly, and ushered her into the bright, luxurious English room, with its blazing fire, and warm curtains, and soft carpet. The young woman's eyes opened wide with wonder. "I lofe this," she said, basking before the fire, and kissed Miss Susan again, notwithstanding her resistance. There was no one in the house so tall, not even Stevens, and to resist her effectually was not in anybody's power at Whiteladies. The child had been carried up-stairs, and lay, still dressed, fast asleep upon the bed.

"Shall I stay, ma'am, and help the—lady—with the chyild?" said Martha, in a whisper.

"No, no; she will know how to manage it herself," said Miss Susan, not caring that any of the household should see too much of the stranger.

A curious, foreign-looking box, with many iron clamps and bands, had been brought from the railway in the interval. The candles were lighted, the fire burning, the kettle boiling on the hob, and a plentiful supply of bread and milk for the baby when it woke. What more could be required? Miss Susan left her undesired

guests with a sense of relief, which, alas! was very short-lived. She had escaped, indeed, for the moment; but the prospect before her was so terrible, that her very heart sickened at it. What was she to do? She was in this woman's power; in the power of a reckless creature, who could by a word hold her up to shame and bitter disgrace; who could take away from her all the honour she had earned in her long honourable life, and leave a stigma upon her very grave. What could she do to get rid of her, to send her back again to her relations, to get her out of the desecrated house? Miss Susan's state of mind, on this dreadful night, was one chaos of fear, doubt, misery, remorse, and pain. Her sin had found her out. Was she to be condemned to live hereafter all her life in presence of this constant reminder of it? If she had suffered but little before, she suffered enough to make up for it now.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE night was terrible for this peaceful household in a more extended sense than that deep misery which the arrival of the stranger cost Miss Susan. Those quiet people, mistresses and servants, had but just gone to bed when the yells of the child rang through the silence, waking and disturbing every one, from Jane, who slept with the intense sleep of youth, unawakable by all ordinary commotions, to Augustine, who spent the early night in prayer, and Miss Susan, who neither prayed nor slept, and felt as if she should be, henceforward, incapable of either. These yells continued for about an hour, during which time the household, driven distracted, made repeated visits in all manner of costumes to the door of the East room, which was locked, and from which the stranger shrilly repelled them.

"Je dois le dompter!" she cried through the thick oaken door, and in the midst of those screams which,

to the unaccustomed ear, seem so much more terrible than they really are.

"It'll bust itself, that's what it'll do," said the old cook; "particular as it's a boy. Boys should never be let scream like that; it's far more dangerous for them than it is for a gell."

Cook was a widow, and therefore an authority on all such subjects. After an hour or so the child was heard to sink into subdued sobbings, and Whiteladies, relieved, went to bed, thanking its stars that this terrible experience was over. But long before daylight the conflict recommenced, and once more the inmates, in their night-dresses, and Miss Susan in her dressing-gown, assembled round the door of the East room.

"For heaven's sake, let some one come in and help you," said Miss Susan through the door.

"Je dois le dompter," answered the other fiercely. "Go away, away! Je dois le dompter!"

"What's she a-going to do, ma'am?" said Cook. "Dump 'um? Good Lord, she don't mean to beat the child, I 'ope—particular as it's a boy."

Three times in the night the dreadful experience was repeated, and I leave the reader to imagine with what feelings the family regarded its new inmate. They were

all down-stairs very early, with that exhausted and dissipated feeling which want of sleep gives. The maids found some comfort in the tea, which Cook made instantly to restore their nerves; but even this brought little comfort to Miss Susan, who lay awake and miserable in her bed, fearing every moment a repetition of the cries, and feeling herself helpless and enslaved in the hands of some diabolical creature, who, having no mercy on the child, would, she felt sure, have none on her, and whom she had no means of subduing or getting rid of. All the strength had gone out of her, mind and body. She shrank even from the sight of the stranger, from getting up to meet her again, from coming into personal contact and conflict with her. She became a weak old woman, and cried hopelessly on her pillow, not knowing where to turn, after the exhaustion of that terrible night. This, however, was but a passing mood like another, and she got up at her usual time, and faced the world and her evil fortune, as she must have done had an earthquake swept all she cared for out of the world—as we must all do, whatever may have happened to us, even the loss of all that makes life sweet. She got up and dressed herself as usual, with the same care as always, and went down-stairs and called the family

together for prayers, and did everything as she was used to do it—watching the door every moment, however, and trembling lest that tall black figure should come in. It was a great relief, however, when, by way of accounting for Cook's absence at morning prayers, Martha pointed out that buxom personage in the garden, walking about with the child in her arms.

"The—lady's—a-having her breakfast in bed," said Martha. "What did the child do, ma'am, but stretches out its little arms when me and Cook went in first thing, after she unlocked the door."

"Why did two of you go?" said Miss Susan. "Did she ring the bell?"

"Well, ma'am," said Martha, "you'll say it's one o' my silly, nervish ways. But I was frightened—I don't deny. What with Cook saying as the child would bust itself, and what with them cries—but, Lord bless you, it's all right," said Martha; "and a-laughing and crowing to Cook, and all of us as soon as it got down to the kitchen, and taking its sop as natural! I can't think what could come over the child to be that wicked with its ma."

"Some people never get on with children," said Miss Susan, feeling some apology necessary; "and no doubt

it misses the nurse it was used to. And it was tired with the journey——"

"That's exactly what Cook says," said Martha. "Some folks has no way with children—even when it's the ma—and Cook says——"

"I hope you have taken the lady's breakfast up to her comfortably," said Miss Susan; "tell her, with my compliments, that I hope she will not hurry to get up, as she must have had a very bad night."

"Who is she?" said Augustine quietly.

Miss Susan knew that this question awaited her; and it was very comforting to her mind to know that Augustine would accept the facts of the story calmly without thinking of any meaning that might lie below them, or asking any explanations. She told her these facts quite simply.

"She is the daughter-in-law of the Austins of Bruges —their son's widow—her child is Herbert's next of kin and heir presumptive. Since dear Bertie has got better his chances, of course, have become very much smaller; and, as I trust," said Miss Susan fervently, with tears of pain coming to her eyes, "that my dear boy will live to have heirs of his own, this baby, poor thing, has no chance at all to speak of; but, you see, as they do not

know that, and heard that Herbert was never likely to recover, and are people quite different from ourselves, and don't understand things, they still look upon him as the heir."

"Yes," said Augustine, "I understand; and they think he has a right to live here."

"It is not that, dear. The young woman has quarrelled with her husband's parents, or she did not feel happy with them. Such things happen often, you know; perhaps there were faults on both sides. So she took it into her head to come here. She is an orphan, with no friends, and a young widow, poor thing; but I am most anxious to get her sent away."

"Why should she be sent away?" said Augustine. "It is our duty to keep her, if she wishes to stay. An orphan—a widow! Susan, you do not see our duties as I wish you could. We who are eating the bread which ought to be the property of the widow and the orphan—how dare we cast one of them from our doors! No, if she wishes it, she must stay."

"Augustine!" cried her sister with tears, "I will do anything you tell me, dear; but don't ask me to do this! I do not like her—I am afraid of her. Think how she must have used the child last night! I cannot let her stay."

Augustine put down the cup of milk which was her habitual breakfast, and looked across the table at her sister. "It is not by what we like we should be ruled," she said. "Alas, most people are; but we have a duty. If she is not good, she has the more need of help; but I would not leave the child with her," she added, for she, too, had felt what it was to be disturbed. "I would give the child to some one else who can manage it. Otherwise you cannot refuse her, an orphan and widow, if she wishes to stay."

"Austine, you mistake, you mistake!" cried Miss Susan, driven to her wits' end.

"No, I do not mistake; from our door no widow and no orphan should ever be driven away. When it is Herbert's house, he must do as he thinks fit," said Augustine; "at least I know he will not be guided by me. But for us, who live to expiate——No, she must not be sent away. But I would give the charge of the child to some one else," she added with less solemnity of tone; "certainly I would have some one else for the child."

With this Augustine rose and went away, her hands in her sleeves, her pace as measured as ever. She gave forth her solemn decision on general principles, knowing

no other, with an abstract superiority which offended no one, because of its very abstraction, and curious imperfection in all practical human knowledge. Miss Susan was too wise to be led by her sister in ordinary affairs; but she listened to this judgment, her heart wrung by pangs which she could not avow to any one. It was not the motive which bulked so largely with Augustine, and was, indeed, the only one she took account of, which affected her sister. It was neither Christian pity for the helpless, nor a wish to expiate the sins of the past, that moved Miss Susan. The emotion which was battling in her heart was fear. How could she bear it to be known what she had done? How could she endure to let Augustine know, or Herbert, or Reine?—or even Farrel-Austin, who would rejoice over her, and take delight in her shame? She dared not turn her visitor out of the house, for this reason. She sat by herself when Augustine had gone, with her hands clasped tight, and a bitter, helpless beating and fluttering of her heart. Never before had she felt herself in the position of a coward, afraid to face the exigency before her. She had always dared to meet all things, looking danger and trouble in the face; but then she had never done anything in her life to be

ashamed of before. She shrank now from meeting the unknown woman who had taken possession of her house. If she had remained there in her room, shut up, Miss Susan felt as if she would gladly have compounded to let her remain, supplying her with as many luxuries as she cared for. But to face her, to talk to her, to have to put up with her, and her companionship, this was more than she could bear.

She had not been able to look at her letters in her preoccupied and excited state; but when she turned them over now, in the pause that ensued after Augustine's departure, she found a letter from old Guillaume Austin, full of trouble, narrating to her how his daughter-in-law had fled from the house in consequence of some quarrel, carrying the child with her, who was the joy of their hearts. So far as she was concerned, the old man said, they were indifferent to the loss, for since Giovanna's child was born she had changed her character entirely, and was no longer the heart-broken widow who had obtained all their sympathies. "She had always a peculiar temper," the father wrote. "My poor son did not live happy with her, though we were ready to forget everything in our grief. She is not one of our people, but by origin an Italian, fond of pleasure,

and very hot-tempered, like all of that race. But recently she has been almost beyond our patience. Madame will remember how good my old wife was to her—though she cannot bear the idle—letting her do nothing, as is her nature. Since the baby was born, however, she has been most ungrateful to my poor wife, looking her in the face as if to frighten, and with insolent smiles; and I have heard her even threaten to betray the wife of my bosom to me for something unknown—some dress, I suppose, or other trifle my Marie has given her without telling me. This is insufferable; but we have borne it all for the child, who is the darling of our old age. Madame will feel for me, for it is your loss, too, as well as ours. The child, the heir, is gone! who charmed us and made us feel young again. My wife thinks she may have gone to you, and therefore I write; but I have no hopes of this myself, and only fear that she may have married some one, and taken our darling from us for ever—for who would separate a mother from her child?—though the boy does not love her, not at all, not so much as he loves us and his aunt Gertrude, who thinks she sees in him the boy whom she lost. Write to me in pity, dear and honoured madame, and if by any chance the unhappy Gio-

vanna has gone to you, I will come and fetch her away."

This letter was balm to Miss Susan's wounds. She wrote an answer to M. Austin at once, then bethought herself of a still quicker mode of conveying information, and wrote a telegram, which she dispatched by the gardener, mounted on the best horse in the stable, to the railway. "She is here with the child, quite well. I shall be glad to see you," Miss Susan wrote; then sat down again, tremulous, but resolute, to think of what was before her. But for the prospect of old Guillaume's visit, what a prospect it was that lay before her! She could understand how that beautiful face would look, with its mocking defiance at the helpless old woman who was in her power, and could not escape from her. Poor old Madame Austin! *Her* sin was the greatest of all, Miss Susan felt, with a sense of relief, for was it not her good husband whom she was deceiving, and had not all the execution of the complot been left in her hands? Miss Susan knew she herself had lied; but how much oftener Madame Austin must have lied, practically and by word and speech! Everything she had done for weeks and months must have been a lie, and thus she had put herself in this woman's power, who cruelly had

taken advantage of it. Miss Susan realised, with a shudder, how the poor old Flemish woman, who was her confederate, must have been put to the agony! how she must have been held over the precipice, pushed almost to the verge, obliged perhaps to lie and lie again, in order to save herself. She trembled at the terrible picture; and now all that had been done to Madame Austin was about to be done to herself—for was not she, too, in this pitiless woman's power?

A tap at the door. She thought it was the invader of her peace, and said "Come in" faintly. Then the door was pushed open, and a tottering little figure, so low down that Miss Susan, unprepared for this pigmy, did not see it at first, came in with a feeble rush, as babies do, too much afraid of its capabilities of progress to have any confidence of holding out. "Did you ever see such a darling, ma'am?" said Cook. "We couldn't keep him not to ourselves a moment longer. I whips him up, and I says, 'Miss Susan must see him.' Now, did you ever set your two eyes on a sweeter boy?"

Miss Susan, relieved, did as she was told; she fixed her eyes upon the boy, who, after his rush, subsided on to the floor, and gazed at her in silence. He was as fair as an English child, a flaxen-headed,

blue-eyed, Flemish baby, with innocent, wide-open eyes.

"He ain't a bit like his ma, bless him, and he takes to strangers quite natural. Look at him a-cooing and a-laughing at you, ma'am, as he never set eyes on before! But human nature is unaccountable," said Cook, with awestricken gravity, "for he can't abide his ma."

"Did you ever know such a case before?" said Miss Susan, who, upon the ground that Cook was a widow, looked up to her judgment on such matters as all the rest of the household did. Cook was in very high feather at this moment, having at last proved beyond doubt the superiority of her knowledge and experience as having once had a child (still-born) of her own.

"Well, ma'am," said Cook, "that depends. There's some folk as never have no way with children, married or single, it don't matter. Now that child, if you let him set at your feet, and give him a reel out of your work-box to play with, will be as good as gold; for you've got a way with children, you have; but he can't abide his ma."

"Leave him there, if you think he will be good," said Miss Susan. She did more than give the baby a reel out of her workbox, for she took out the scissors, pins,

needles, all sharp and pointed things, and put down the workbox itself on the carpet. And then she sat watching the child with the most curious, exquisite mixture of anguish and a kind of pleasure in her heart. Poor old Guillaume Austin's grandchild, a true scion of the old stock! but not as was supposed. She watched the little tremulous dabs the baby made at the various articles that pleased him. How he grasped them in the round fat fingers that were just long enough to close on a reel; how he threw them away to snatch at others; the pitiful look of mingled suffering, injured feeling, and indignation which came over his face in a moment when the lid of the box dropped on his fingers; his unconscious little song to himself, cooing and gurgling in a baby monologue. What was the child thinking? No clue had he to the disadvantages under which he was entering life, or the advantages which had been planned for him before he was born, and which, by the will of Providence, were falling into nothing. Poor little unconscious baby! The workbox and its reels were at this moment quite world enough for him.

It was an hour or two later before the stranger came down-stairs. She had put on a black silk dress, and done up her hair carefully, and made her appearance as

imposing as possible; and, indeed, so far as this went, she required few external helps. The child took no notice of her, sheltered as he was under Miss Susan's wing, until she took him up roughly, disturbing his toys and play. Then he pushed her away with a repetition of last night's screams, beating with his little angry hands against her face, and shrieking, "No, no!" his only intelligible word, at the top of his lungs. The young woman grew exasperated too, and repaid the blows he gave with one or two hearty slaps and a shake, by means of which the cries became tremulous and wavering, though they were as loud as ever. By the time the conflict had come to this point, however, Cook and Martha, flushed with indignation, were both at the door. "Il ne faut pas frapper l'enfang!" Miss Susan called out loudly in her peculiar French. "Vous ne resterez pas un moment ici si vous ne donnez pas cet enfang au Cook; vous écoutez? Donnez, donnez, toute de suite!" Her voice was so imperative that the woman was cowed. She turned and tossed the child to Cook, who, red as her own fire, stood holding out her arms to receive the screaming and struggling boy.

"What do I care?" said the stranger. "Petit sot! cochon! va! I slept not all the night," she added.

"You heard? Figure to yourself whether I wish to keep him now. Ah, petit fripon, petit vaurien! Va!"

"Madame Austin," said Miss Susan solemnly as the women went away, carrying the child, who clung to Cook's broad bosom and sobbed on her shoulder. "You do not stay here another hour, unless you promise to give up the child to those who can take care of him. *You* cannot; that is clear."

"And yet he is my child," said the young woman with a malicious smile. "Madame knows he is my child? He is always sage with his aunt Gertrude, and likes her red and white face. Madame remembers Gertrude, who lost her baby? But mine belongs to *me*."

"He may belong to you," said Miss Susan with almost a savage tone, "but he is not to remain with you another hour, unless you wish to take him away; in which case," said Miss Susan, going to the door and throwing it open, "you are perfectly at liberty to depart, him and you."

The stranger sat for a moment looking at her, then went and looked out into the red-floored passage, with a kind of insolent scrutiny. Then she made Miss Susan a mock curtsey, and sat down.

"They are welcome to have him," she said calmly.

"What should I want him for? Even a child, a baby, should know better than to hate one. I do not like it; it is a nasty little thing—very like Gertrude, and with her ways exactly. It is hard to see your child resemble another woman; should not madame think so, if she had been like me, and had a child?"

"Look here," Miss Susan said, going up to her and shaking her by the shoulders, with a whiteness and force of passion about her which cowed Giovanna in spite of herself—"look here! This is how you treated your poor mother-in-law, no doubt, and drove her wild. I will not put up with it—do you hear me? I will drive you out of the house this very day, and let you do what you will and say what you will, rather than bear this. You hear me? and I mean what I say."

Giovanna stared, blank with surprise, at the resolute woman, who, driven beyond all patience, made this speech to her. She was astounded. She answered quite humbly, sinking her voice, "I will do what you tell me. Madame is not a fool, like my belle-mère."

"She is not a fool either!" cried Miss Susan. "Ah, I wish now she had been! I wish I had seen your face that day! Oh yes, you are pretty—pretty enough! but

I never should have put anything in your power if I had seen your face that day!"

Giovanna gazed at her for a moment, still bewildered. Then she rose and looked at herself in the old glass, which distorted that beautiful face a little. "I am glad you find me pretty," she said. "My face! it is not a white and red moon, like Gertrude's, who is always praised and spoiled; but I hope it may do more for me than hers has done yet. That is what I intend. My poor pretty face—that it may win fortune yet!—my face or my boy."

Miss Susan, her passion dying out, stood and looked at this unknown creature with dismay. Her face or her boy!—what did she mean? or was there any meaning at all in these wild words—words that might be mere folly and vanity, and indeed resembled that more than anything else. Perhaps, after all, she was but a fool who required a little firmness of treatment—nothing more.

CHAPTER IX.

MISS SUSAN AUSTIN was not altogether devoid in ordinary circumstances of one very common feminine weakness to which independent women are especially liable. She had the old-fashioned prejudice that it was a good thing to "consult a man" upon points of difficulty which occurred in her life. The process of consulting, indeed, was apt to be a peculiar one. If he distinctly disagreed with herself, Miss Susan set the man whom she consulted down as a fool, or next to a fool, and took her own way, and said nothing about the consultation. But when by chance he happened to agree with her, then she made great capital of his opinion, and announced it everywhere as the cause of her own action, whatever that might be. Everard, before his departure, had been the depository of her confidence on most occasions, and as he was very amenable to her influence, and readily saw things in the light which she wished him to see them in, he had been very useful to her, or so at

least she said ; and the idea of sending for Everard, who had just returned from the West Indies, occurred to her almost in spite of herself, when this new crisis happened at Whiteladies. The idea came into her mind, but next moment she shivered at the thought, and turned from it mentally as though it had stung her. What could she say to Everard to account for the effect Giovanna produced upon her—the half terror, half hatred, which filled her mind towards the new-comer, and the curious mixture of fright and repugnance with which even the child seemed to regard its mother? How could she explain all this to him? She had so long given him credit for understanding everything, that she had come to believe in this marvellous power of discrimination with which she had herself endowed him ; and now she shrank from permitting Everard even to see the infliction to which she had exposed herself, and the terrible burden she had brought upon the house. He could not understand,—and yet who could tell that he might not understand? see through her trouble, and perceive that some reason must exist for such a thraldom? If he, or any one else, ever suspected the real reason, Miss Susan felt that she must die. Her character, her position in the family, the place she held in the world, would be gone. Had things

been as they were when she had gone upon her mission to the Austins at Bruges, I have no doubt the real necessities of the case, and the important issues depending upon the step she had taken, would have supported Miss Susan in the hard part she had now to play; but to continue to have this part to play after the necessity was over, and when it was no longer, to all appearance, of any immediate importance at all who Herbert's heir should be, gave a bitterness to this unhappy *rôle* which it is impossible to describe. The strange woman who had taken possession of the house without any real claim to its shelter, had it in her power to ruin and destroy Miss Susan, though nothing she could do could now affect Whiteladies; and for this poor personal reason Miss Susan felt, with a pang, she must bear all Giovanna's impertinences, and the trouble of her presence, and all the remarks upon her—her manners, her appearance, her want of breeding, and her behaviour in the house, which no doubt everybody would make. Everard, should he appear, would be infinitely annoyed to find such an inmate in the house. Herbert, should he come home, would with equal certainty wish to get rid of so singular a visitor. Miss Susan saw a hundred difficulties and complications in her way. She hoped

a little from the intervention of Monsieur Guillaume Austin, to whom she had written, after sending off her telegram, in full detail, begging him to come to Whiteladies, to recover his grandchild, if that was possible; but Giovanna's looks were not very favourable to this hope. Thus the punishment of her sin, for which she had felt so little remorse when she did it, found her out at last. I wonder if successful sin ever does fill the sinner with remorse, or whether human nature, always so ready in self-defence, does not set to work, in every case, to invent reasons which seem to justify, or almost more than justify, the wickedness which serves its purpose? This is too profound an inquiry for these pages; but certainly Miss Susan, for one, felt the biting of remorse in her heart when her sin proved useless, and when it became nothing but a menace and a terror to her, as she had never felt it before. Oh, how could she have charged her conscience and sullied her life (she said to herself) for a thing so useless, so foolish, so little likely to advantage any one? Why had she done it? to disappoint Farrel-Austin! that had been her miserable motive—nothing more; and this was how it had all ended. Had she left the action of Providence alone, and refrained from interfering, Farrel-Austin would have

been discomfited all the same, but her conscience would have been clear. I do not think that Miss Susan had as yet any feeling in her mind that the discomfiture of Farrel-Austin was not a most righteous object, and one which justified entirely the interference of Heaven.

But, in the meantime, what a difference it made in her peaceable domestic life! No doubt she ought to have been suffering as much for a long time past, for the offence was not new, though the punishment was; but if it came late, it came bitterly. Her pain was like fire in her heart. This seemed to herself, as she thought of it—and she did little but think of it—to be the best comparison. Like fire—burning and consuming her, yet never completing its horrible work—gnawing continually with a redhot glow and quivering as of lambent flame. She seemed to herself now and then to have the power, as it were, of taking her heart out of these glowing ashes, and looking at it, but always to let it drop back piteously into the torment. Oh, how she wished and longed, with an eager hopelessness which seemed to give fresh force to her suffering, that the sin could be undone, that these two last years could be wiped out of time, that she could go back to the moment before she set out for Bruges! She longed for this with an intensity which was

equalled only by its impossibility. If only she had not done it! Once it occurred to her with a thrill of fright, that the sensations of her mind were exactly those which are described in many a sermon and sensational religious book. Was it hell that she had within her? She shuddered, and burst forth into a low moaning when the question shaped itself in her mind. But notwithstanding all these horrors, she had to conduct herself as became a person in good society—to manage all her affairs, and talk to the servants, and smile upon chance visitors, as if everything were well—which added a refinement of pain to these tortures. And thus the days passed on till Monsieur Guillaume Austin arrived from Bruges—the one event which still inspired her with something like hope.

Giovanna, meanwhile, settled down in Whiteladies with every appearance of intending to make it her settled habitation. After the first excitement of the arrival was over, she fell back into a state of indolent comfort, which for the time, until she became tired of it, seemed more congenial to her than the artificial activity of her commencement, and which was much more agreeable, or at least much less disagreeable, to the other members of the household. She gave up the child to Cook, who

managed it sufficiently well to keep it quiet and happy, to the great envy of the rest of the family. Every one envied Cook her experience and success, except the mother of the child, who shrugged her shoulders, and, with evident satisfaction in getting free from the trouble, fell back upon a stock of books she had found, which made the weary days pass more pleasantly to her than they would otherwise have done. These were French novels, which once had belonged, before her second marriage, to Madame de Mirfleur, and which she, too, had found a great resource. Let not the reader be alarmed for the morality of the house. They were French novels which had passed under Miss Susan's censorship, and been allowed by her, therefore they were harmless of their kind—too harmless, I fear, for Giovanna's taste, who would have liked something more exciting; but in her transplantation to so very foreign a soil as Whiteladies, and the absolute blank which existence appeared to her there, she was more glad than can be described of the poor little unbound books, green and yellow, over which the mother of Herbert and Reine had yawned through many a long and weary day. It was Miss Susan herself who had produced them out of pity for her visitor, unwelcome as that visitor was—and,

indeed, for her own relief. For, however objectionable a woman may be who sits opposite to you all day poring over a novel, whether green or yellow, she is less objectionable than the same woman when doing nothing, and following you about wherever you move with a pair of great black eyes. Not being able to get rid of the stranger more completely, Miss Susan was very thankful to be so far rid of her as this, and her heart stirred with a faint hope that perhaps the good linen-draper who was coming might be able to exercise some authority over his daughter-in-law, and carry her away with him. She tried to persuade herself that she did not hope for this, but the hope grew involuntarily stronger and stronger as the moment approached, and she sat waiting in the warm and tranquil quiet of the afternoon for the old man's arrival. She had sent the carriage to the station for him, and sat expecting him with her heart beating, as much excited, almost, as if she had been a girl looking for a very different kind of visitor. Miss Susan, however, did not tell Giovanna, who sat opposite to her, with her feet on the fender, holding her book between her face and the fire, who it was whom she expected. She would not diminish the effect of the arrival by giving any time for preparation, but hoped as much from the suddenness

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of the old man's appearance as from his authority. Giovanna was chilly, like most indolent people, and fond of the fire. She had drawn her chair as close to it as possible, and though she shielded her face with all the care she could, yet there was still a hot colour on the cheeks, which were exposed now and then for a moment to the blaze. Miss Susan sat behind, in the background, with her knitting, waiting for the return of the carriage which had been sent to the station for Monsieur Guillaume, and now and then casting a glance over her knitting-needles at the disturber of her domestic peace. What a strange figure to have established itself in this tranquil English house! There came up before Miss Susan's imagination a picture of the room behind the shop at Bruges, so bare of every grace and prettiness, with the cooking going on, and the young woman seated in the corner, to whom no one paid any attention. There too, probably, she had been self-indulgent and self-absorbed; but what a difference there was in her surroundings! The English lady, I have no doubt, exaggerated the advantages of her own comfortable, softly-cushioned drawing-room, and probably the back room at Bruges, if less pretty and less luxurious, was also much less dull to Giovanna, than this curtained,

carpeted place, with no society but that of a quiet Englishwoman, who disapproved of her. At Bruges there had been opportunities of talk with various people, more entertaining than even the novels; and though Giovanna had been disapproved of there, as now, she had been able to give as well as take—at least since power had been put into her hands. At present she yawned sadly as she turned the leaves. It was horribly dull, and horribly long, this vacant, uneventful afternoon. If some one would come, if something would happen, what a relief it would be! She yawned as she turned the page.

At last there came a sound of carriage-wheels on the gravel. Miss Susan did not suppose that her visitor took any notice, but I need not say that Giovanna, to whom something new would have been so great a piece of good fortune, gave instant attention, though she still kept the book before her, a shield not only from the fire, but from her companion's observation. Giovanna saw that Miss Susan was secretly excited and anxious, and I think the younger woman anticipated some amusement at the expense of her companion—expecting an elderly lover, perhaps, or something of a kind which might have stirred herself. But when the figure of her

father-in-law appeared at the door, very ingratiating and slightly timid, in two greatcoats which increased his bulk without increasing his dignity, and with a great *cache-nez* about his neck, Giovanna perceived at once the conspiracy against her, and in a moment collected her forces to meet it. M. Guillaume represented to her a laborious life, frugal fare, plain dress, and domestic authority, such as that was—the things from which she had fled. Here (though it was dull) she had ease, luxury, the consciousness of power, and a future in which she could better herself—in which, indeed, she might look forward to being mistress of the luxurious house, and ordering it so that it should cease to be dull. To allow herself to be taken back to Bruges, to the back-shop, was as far as anything could be from her intentions. How could they be so foolish as to think it? She let her book drop on her lap, and looked at the plotters with a glow of laughter at their simplicity lighting up her great eyes.

As for Monsieur Guillaume, he was in a state of considerable excitement, pleasure, and pain. He was pleased to come to the wealthy house in which he felt a sense of proprietorship, much quickened by the comfort of the luxurious English carriage in which he had

driven from the station. This was a sign of grandeur and good-fortune comprehensible to everybody; and the old shopkeeper felt at once the difference involved. On the other hand, he was anxious about his little grandchild, whom he adored, and a little afraid of the task of subduing its mother, which had been put into his hands; and he was very desirous of making a good appearance, and impressing favourably his new relations, on whose good-will, somehow or other, depended his future inheritance. He made a very elaborate bow when he came in, and touched respectfully the tips of the fingers which Miss Susan extended to him. She was a great lady, and he was a shopkeeper; she was an Englishwoman, reserved and stately, and he a homely old Fleming. Neither of them knew very well how to treat the other, and Miss Susan, who felt that all the comfort of her future life depended on how she managed this old man, and upon the success of his mission, was still more anxious and elaborate than he was. She drew forward the easiest chair for him, and asked for his family with a flutter of effusive politeness quite unlike her usual demeanour.

"And Madame Jean is quite safe with me," she said, when their first salutations were over.

Here was the tug of war. The old man turned to his daughter-in-law eagerly, yet somewhat tremulous. She had pushed away her chair from the fire, and with her book still in her hands, sat looking at him with shining eyes.

"Ah, Giovanna," he said, shaking his head, "how thou hast made all our hearts sore! how could you do it? We should not have crossed you, if you had told us you were weary of home. The house is miserable without you; how could you go away?"

"Mon beau-père," said Giovanna, taking the kiss he bestowed on her forehead with indifference, "say you have missed the child, if you please, that may be true enough; but as for me, no one pretended to care for me."

"Mon enfant——"

"Assez, assez! Let us speak the truth. Madame knows well enough," said Giovanna, "it is the baby you love. If you could have him without me, I do not doubt it would make you very happy. Only that it is impossible to separate the child from the mother—every one knows as much as that."

She said this with a malicious look towards Miss Susan, who shrank involuntarily. But Monsieur Guil-

laume, who accepted the statement as a simple fact, did not shrink, but assented, shaking his head.

"Assuredly, assuredly," he said, "nor did any one wish it. The child is our delight; but you, too, Giovanna, you too——"

She laughed.

"I do not think the others would say so—my mother-in-law, for example, or Gertrude; nor, indeed, you either, mon beau-père, if you had not a motive. I was always the lazy one—the useless one. It was I who had the bad temper. You never cared for me, or made me comfortable. Now *ces dames* are kind, and this will be the boy's home."

"If he succeeds," said Miss Susan, interposing from the background, where she stood watchful, growing more and more anxious. "You are aware that now this is much less certain. My nephew is better; he is getting well and strong."

They both turned to look at her; Giovanna with startled, wide-open eyes, and the old man with an evident thrill of surprise. Then he seemed to divine a secret motive in this speech, and gave Miss Susan a glance of intelligence, and smiled and nodded his head.

"To be sure, to be sure," he said. "Monsieur, the present propriétaire, may live. It is to be hoped that he will continue to live—at least, until the child is older. Yes, yes, Giovanna, what you say is true. I appreciate your maternal care, ma fille. It is right that the boy should visit his future home; that he should learn the manners of the people, and all that is needful to a proprietor. But he is very young—a few years hence will be soon enough. And why should you have left us so hastily, so secretly? We have all been unhappy," he added with a sigh.

I cannot describe how Miss Susan listened to all this, with an impatience which reached the verge of the intolerable. To hear them taking it all calmly for granted —calculating on Herbert's death as an essential preliminary of which they were quite sure! But she kept silent with a painful effort, and kept in the background, trembling with the struggle to restrain herself. It was best that she should take no part, say nothing, but leave the issue as far as she could to Providence. To Providence! the familiar word came to her unawares; but what right had she to appeal to Providence—to trust in Providence in such a matter. She quaked, and withdrew a little further still, leaving the ground clear.

Surely old Austin would exercise his authority—and could overcome this young rebel without her aid!

The old man waited for an answer, but got none. He was a good man in his way, but he had been accustomed all his life to have his utterances respected, and he did not understand the profane audacity which declined even to reply to him. After a moment's interval he resumed, eager, but yet damped in his confidence,

"Le petit! where is he? I may see him, may not I?"

Miss Susan rose at once to ring the bell for the child, but to her amazement she was stopped by Giovanna.

"Wait a little," she said, "I am the mother. I have the best right. That is acknowledged? No one has any right over him but me?"

Miss Susan quailed before the glance of those eyes, which were so full of meaning. There was something more in the words than mere self-assertion. There was once more a gleam of malicious enjoyment, almost revengeful. What wrong had Giovanna to revenge upon Miss Susan, who had given her the means of asserting herself—who had changed her position in the world alto-

gether, and given her a standing-ground which she never before possessed? The mistress of Whiteladies, so long foremost and regnant, sat down again behindbacks with a sense of humiliation not to be described. She left the two strangers to fight out their quarrel without any interference on her part. As for Giovanna, she had no revengeful meaning whatever: but she loved to feel and to show her power.

"Assuredly, ma fille," said the old man, who was in her power too, and felt it with not much less dismay than Miss Susan.

"Then understand," said the young woman, rising from her chair with sudden energy, and throwing down the book which she had up to this moment kept in her hands, "I will have no one interfere. The child is to me—he is mine, and I will have no one interfere. It shall not be said that he is more *gentil*, more *sage*, with another than with his mother. He shall not be taught any more to love others more than me. To others he is nothing; but he is mine, mine, mine! and mine only!" she said, putting her hands together with a sudden clap, the colour mounting to her cheeks, and the light flashing in her eyes.

Miss Susan, who in another would have been roused

by this self-assertion, was quite cowed by it now, and sat with a pang in her heart which I cannot describe, listening and—submitting. What could she say or do?

"Assurément, ma fille; assurément, ma fille," murmured poor old M. Guillaume, looking at this rampant symbol of natural power with something like terror. He was quite unprepared for such an outburst. Giovanna had been to him but the feeblest creature in the house, the dependant, generally disapproved of, and always powerless. To be sure, since her child was born, he had heard more complaints of her, and had even perceived that she was not as submissive as formerly; but then it is always so easy for the head of the house to believe that it is his womankind who are to blame, and that when matters are in his own hands all will go well. He was totally discomfited, dismayed, and taken by surprise. He could not understand that this was the creature who had sat in the corner, and been made of no account. He did not know what to do in the emergency. He longed for his wife, to ask counsel of, to direct him; and then he remembered that his wife, too, had seemed a little afraid of Giovanna, a sentiment at which he had loftily smiled, saying to himself, good man, that the

girl, poor thing, was a good girl enough, and as soon as he lifted up a finger, would no doubt submit as became her. In this curious reversal of positions and change of circumstances, he could but look at her bewildered, and had not an idea what to say or to do.

CHAPTER X.

THE evening which followed was of the most uncomfortable kind. Good M. Guillaume, divided between curiosity and the sense of novelty with which he found himself in a place so unlike his ideas—a desire to please the ladies of the house, and an equally strong desire to settle the question which had brought him to Whiteladies—was altogether shaken out of his use and wont. He had been allowed a little interview with the child, which clung to him, and could only be separated from him at the cost of much squalling and commotion, in which even the blandishments of Cook were but partially availing. The old man, who had been accustomed to carry the baby about with him, to keep it on his knee at meals, and give it all those illegitimate indulgences which are common where nurseries and nursery laws do not exist, did not understand, and was much afflicted by the compulsory separation.

"It is time for the baby to go to bed, and we are

going in to dinner," Miss Susan said; as if there was any reason (thought poor M. Guillaume) why the baby should not come to dinner too, or why inexorably it should go to bed! How often had he kept it on his knee, and fed it with indigestible morsels till its countenance shone with gravy and happiness! He had to submit, however, Giovanna looking at him while he did so (he thought) with a curious, malicious satisfaction. M. Guillaume had never been in England before, and the dinner was as odd to him as the first foreign dinner is to an Englishman. He did not understand the succession of dishes, the heavy substantial soup, the solid roast mutton; neither did he understand the old hall, which looked to him like a chapel, or the noiseless Stevens behind his chair, or the low-toned conversation, of which indeed there was very little. Augustine, in her grey robes, was to him simply a nun, whom he also addressed as Giovanna had done, as "Ma sœur." Why she should be there in a private house at an ordinary table, he could not tell, but supposed it to be merely one of those wonderful ways of the English which he had so often heard of. Giovanna, who sat opposite to him, and who was by this time familiarised with the routine of Whiteladies, scarcely

talked at all; and though Miss Susan, by way of setting him "at his ease," asked a civil question from time to time about his journey, what kind of crossing he had experienced, and other such commonplace matters, yet the old linendraper was abashed by the quiet, the dimness of the great room round him, the strangeness of the mansion and of the meal. The back room behind the shop at Bruges, where the family dined and for the most part lived, seemed to him infinitely more comfortable and pleasant than this solemn place, which, on the other hand, was not in the least like a room in one of the great châteaux of his own rich country, which was the only thing to which he could have compared it. He was glad to accept the suggestion that he was tired, and retire to his room, which, in its multiplicity of comforts, its baths, its carpets, and its curtains, was almost equally bewildering. When, however, rising by skreigh of day, he went out in the soft, mellow brightness of the autumn morning, M. Guillaume's reverential feelings sensibly decreased. The house of Whiteladies did not please him at all; its oldness disgusted him; and those lovely antique carved gables, which were the pride of all the Austins, filled him with contempt. Had they been in stone, indeed, he might have understood that they

were unobjectionable; but brick and wood were so far below the dignity of a château, that he felt a sensible downfall. After all, what was a place like this to tempt a man from the comforts of Bruges, from his own country, and everything he loved? He had formed a very different idea of Whiteladies. Windsor Castle might have come up better to his sublime conception; but this poor little place, with its homely latticed windows, and irregular outlines, appeared to the good old shopkeeper a mere magnified cottage, nothing more. He was disturbed, poor man, in a great many ways. It had appeared to him, before he came, that he had nothing to do but to exert his authority, and bring his daughter-in-law home, and the child, who was of much more importance than she, and without whom he scarcely ventured to face his wife and Gertrude. Giovanna had never counted for much in the house, and to suppose that he should have difficulty in overcoming her will had never occurred to him. But there was something in her look which made him very much more doubtful of his own power than up to this time he had ever been; and this was a humbling and discouraging sensation. Visions, too, of another little business which this visit gave him a most desirable opportunity to conclude, were in his

mind; and he had anticipated a few days overflowing with occupation, in which, having only women to encounter, he could not fail to be triumphantly successful. He had entertained these agreeable thoughts of triumph up to the very moment of arriving at Whiteladies; but somehow the aspect of things was not propitious. Neither Giovanna nor Miss Susan looked as if they were ready to give in to his masculine authority, or to yield to his persuasive influence. The one was defiant, the other roused and on her guard. M. Guillaume had been well managed throughout his life. He had been allowed to suppose that he had everything his own way; his solemn utterances had been listened to with awe, his jokes had been laughed at, his verdict acknowledged as final. A man who is thus treated at home is apt to be easily mortified abroad, where nobody cares to *ménager* his feelings, or to receive his sayings, whether wise or witty, with sentiments properly apportioned to the requirements of the moment. Nothing takes the spirit so completely out of such a man as the first suspicion that he is among people to whom he is not an authority, and who really care no more for his opinion than for that of any other man. M. Guillaume was in this uncomfortable position now. Here were two women, neither of

them in the least impressed by his superiority, whom, by sheer force of reason, it was necessary for him to get the better of. "And women, as is well known, are inaccessible to reason," he said to himself scornfully. This sentiment was consolatory to his pride, but I am far from sure whether a lingering doubt of his own powers of reasoning, when unassisted by prestige and natural authority, had not a great deal to do with it; and the good man felt somewhat small and much discouraged, which it is painful for the father of a family to do.

After breakfast Miss Susan brought him out to see the place. He had done his very best to be civil, to drink tea which he did not like, and eat the bacon and eggs, and do justice to the cold partridge on the sideboard, and now he professed himself delighted to make an inspection of Whiteladies. The leaves had been torn by the recent storm from the trees, so that the foliage was much thinned, and though it was a beautiful autumn morning, with a brilliant blue sky, and sunshine full of that regretful brightness which autumn sunshine so often seems to wear, yellow leaves still came floating, moment by moment, through the soft atmosphere, dropping noiseless on the grass, detached by the light air,

which could not even be called a breeze. The gables of Whiteladies stood out against the blue, with a serene superiority to the waning season, yet a certain sympathetic consciousness in their grey age, of the generations that had fallen about the old place like the leaves. Miss Susan, whose heart was full, looked at the house of her fathers with eyes touched to poetry by emotion.

"The old house has seen many a change," she said, "and not a few sad ones. I am not superstitious about it, like my sister, but you must know, M. Guillaume, that our property was originally Church lands, and that is supposed to bring with it—well, the reverse of a blessing."

"Ah!" said M. Guillaume, "that is then the chapel, as I supposed, in which you dine?"

"The chapel!" cried Miss Susan in dismay. "Oh dear, no—the house is not monastic, as is evident. It is, I believe, the best example, or almost the best example, extant, of an English manor-house."

M. Guillaume saw that he had committed himself, and said no more. He listened with respectful attention while the chief architectural features of the house were pointed out to him. No doubt it was fine, since his informant said so—he would not hurt her feelings by

uttering any doubts on the subject—only, if ever it came into his hands—, he murmured to himself.

"And now about your business," cried Miss Susan, who had done her best to throw off her prevailing anxiety. "Giovanna? you mean to take her back with you—and the child? Your poor good wife must miss the child."

M. Guillaume took off his hat in his perplexity, and rubbed his bald head. "Ah!" he said, "here is my great trouble. Giovanna is more changed than I can say. I have been told of her wilfulness, but Madame knows that women are apt to exaggerate—not but that I have the greatest respect for the sex—" He paused, and made her a reverence, which so exasperated Miss Susan that she could with pleasure have boxed his ears as he bowed. But this was one of the many impulses which it is best for "the sex," as well as other human creatures, to restrain.

"But I find it is true," said M. Guillaume. "She does not show any readiness to obey. I do not understand it. I have always been accustomed to be obeyed, and I do not understand it," he added with plaintive iteration. "Since she has had the child she has power; I suppose that is the explanation. Ladies—with every

respect—are rarely able to support the temptation of having power. Madame will pardon me for saying so, I am sure."

"But you have power also," said Miss Susan. "She is dependent upon you, is not she? and I don't see how she can resist what you say. She has nothing of her own, I suppose?" she continued, pausing upon this point in her inquiries. "She told me so. If she is dependent upon you, she must do as you say."

"That is very true," said the old shopkeeper with a certain embarrassment; "but I must speak frankly to Madame, who is sensible, and will not be offended with what I say. Perhaps it is for this she has come here. It had occurred to my good wife, who has a very good head, that le petit has already rights which should not be forgotten. I do not hesitate to say that women are very quick; these things come into their heads sooner than with us sometimes. My wife thought that there should be a demand for an allowance, a something, for the heir. My wife, Madame knows, is very careful of her children. She loves to lay up for them, to make a little money for them. Le petit had never been thought of, and there was no provision made. She has said for a long time that a little *rente*, a—what you call allowance,

should be claimed for the child. Giovanna has heard it, and that has put another idea into her foolish head; but Madame will easily perceive that the claim is very just, of a something—a little revenue—for the heir."

"From whom is this little revenue to come?" said Miss Susan, looking at him with a calm which she did not feel.

M. Guillaume was embarrassed for the moment; but a man who is accustomed to look at his fellow-creatures from the other side of a counter, and to take money from them, however delicate his feelings may be, has seldom much hesitation in making pecuniary claims. From whom? He had not carefully considered the question. Whiteladies in general had been represented to him by that metaphorical pronoun which is used for so many vague things. *They* ought to give the heir this income; but who *they* were, he was unable on the spur of the moment to say.

"Madame asks from whom?" he said. "I am a stranger. I know little more than the name. From Vite-ladies—from Madame herself—from the estates of which le petit is the heir."

"I have nothing to do with the estates," said Miss

Susan. She was so thankful to be able to speak to him without any one by to make her afraid, that she explained herself with double precision and clearness, and took pains to put a final end to his hopes. "My sister and I are happily independent; and you are aware that the proprietor of Whiteladies is a young man of twenty-one, not at all anxious about an heir, and indeed likely to marry and have children of his own."

"To marry?—to have children?" said M. Guillaume in unaffected dismay. "But, pardon me, M. Herbert is dying. It is an affair of a few weeks, perhaps a few days. This is what you said."

"I said so more than two years ago, M. Guillaume. Since then there has been a most happy change. Herbert is better. He will soon, I hope, be well and strong."

"But he is poitrinaire," said the old man eagerly. "He is beyond hope. There are rallyings and temporary recoveries, but these maladies are never cured—never cured. Is it not so? You said this yesterday, to help me with Giovanna, and I thanked you. But it cannot be, it is not possible. I will not believe it!—such maladies are never cured. And if so, why then—why then!—no, Madame deceives herself. If this were the

case, it would be all in vain, all that has been done; and le petit——"

"I am not to blame, I hope, for le petit," said Miss Susan, trying to smile, but with a horrible constriction at her heart.

"But why then?" said M. Guillaume, bewildered and indignant, "why then? I had settled all with M. Farrel-Austin. Madame has misled me altogether. Madame has turned my house upside down. We were quiet, we had no agitations; our daughter-in-law, if she was not much use to us, was yet submissive, and gave no trouble. But Madame comes, and in a moment all is changed. Giovanna, whom no one thought of, has a baby, and it is put into our heads that he is the heir to a great château in England. Bah! this is your château—this maison de campagne, this construction partly of wood—and now you tell me that le petit is not the heir!"

Miss Susan stood still and looked at the audacious speaker. She was stupefied. To insult herself was nothing, but Whiteladies! It appeared to her that the earth must certainly open and swallow him up.

"Not that I regret your château!" said the linen-draper, wild with wrath. "If it were mine, I would pull

it down, and build something which should be comme il faut, which would last, which should not be of brick and wood. The glass would do for the fruit-houses, early fruits for the market; and with the wood I should make a temple in the garden, where ces dames could drink of the tea! It is all it is good for—a maison de campagne, a house of farmers, a nothing—and so old! the floors swell upward, and the roofs bow downward. It is eaten of worms; it is good for rats, not for human beings to live in. And le petit is not the heir! and it is Guillaume Austin of Bruges that you go to make a laughing-stock of, Madame Suzanne! But it shall not be—it shall not be!"

I do not know what Miss Susan would have replied to this outburst, had not Giovanna suddenly met them coming round the corner of the house. Giovanna had many wrongs to avenge, or thought she had many wrongs to avenge, upon the family of her husband generally, and she had either a favourable inclination towards the ladies who had taken her in and used her kindly, or at least as much hope for the future as tempted her to take their part.

"What is it, mon beau-père, that shall not be?" she cried. "Ah, I know! that which the mother wishes so

much does not please here? You want money, money, though you are so rich. You say you love le petit, but you want money for him. But he is my child, not yours, and I do not ask for any money. I am not so fond of it as you are. I know what the belle-mère says night and day, night and day. 'They should give us money, those rich English, they should give us money; we have them in our power.' That is what she is always saying. Ces dames are very good to me, and I will not have them robbed. I speak plain, but it is true. Ah! you may look as you please, mon beau-père; we are not in Bruges, and I am not frightened. You cannot do anything to me here."

M. Guillaume stood between the two women, not knowing what to do or say. He was wild with rage and disappointment, but he had that chilling sense of discomfiture which, even while it gives the desire to speak and storm, takes away the power. He turned from Giovanna, who defied him, to Miss Susan, who had not got over her horror of his insolence, and regarded him as she might have regarded the devil himself, had that great personage been so little of a gentleman as to think of demolishing Whiteladies. Between the old gentlewoman who was his social superior, and the young

creature made superior to him by all the advantages of youth and by the stronger passions that moved her, the old linendraper stood transfixed, incapable of any individual action.

He took off his hat once more, and took out his handkerchief, and rubbed his bald head with baffled wrath and perplexity. "Sotte!" he said under his breath to his daughter-in-law; and at Miss Susan he cast a look, which was half of curiosity, to see what impression Giovanna's revelations had made upon her, and the other half made up of fear and rage, in equal portions. Miss Susan took the ascendant, as natural to her superior birth and breeding.

"If you will come down this way, through the orchard, I will show you the ruins of the Priory," she said blandly, making a half-curtsey by way of closing the discussion, and turning to lead the way. Her politeness, in which there was just that admixture of contempt which keeps an inferior in his proper place, altogether cowed the old shopkeeper. He turned too, and followed her with increased respect, though suppressed resentment. But he cast another look at Giovanna before he followed, and muttered still stronger expressions, "Imbécile! idiote!" between his teeth, as he

followed his guide along the leafy way. Giovanna took this abuse with great composure. She laughed as she went back across the lawn, leaving them to survey the ruins with what interest they might. She even snapped her fingers with a vulgar, but significant gesture. "*That* for thee and thy evil words!" she said.

CHAPTER XI.

MISS SUSAN felt that it was beyond doubt the work of Providence to increase her punishment that Everard should arrive as he did quite unexpectedly on the evening of this day. M. Guillaume had calmed down out of the first passion of his disappointment, and as he was really fond of the child, and stood in awe of his wife and daughter, who were still more devoted to it, he was now using all his powers to induce Giovanna to go back with him. Everard met them in the green lane, on the north side of the house, when he arrived. Their appearance struck him with some surprise. The old man carried in his arms the child, which was still dressed in its Flemish costume, with the little close cap encircling its round face. The baby had its arms closely clasped round the old man's neck, and M. Guillaume, in that conjunction, looked more venerable and more amiable than when he was arguing with Miss Susan. Giovanna walked beside him, and a very animated con-

versation was going on between them. It would be difficult to describe the amazement with which Everard perceived this singularly un-English group so near Whiteladies. They seemed to have come from the little gate which opened on the lane, and they were in eager almost violent, controversy about something. Who were they? and what could they have to do with Whiteladies? he asked himself, wondering. Everard walked in, unannounced, through the long passages, and opened softly the door of the drawing-room. Miss Susan was seated at a small desk near one of the windows. She had her face buried in her hands, most pathetic and most suggestive of all the attitudes of distress. Her grey hair was pushed back a little by the painful grasp of her fingers. She was giving vent to a low moaning, almost more the breathing of pain than an articulate cry of suffering.

"Aunt Susan! What is the matter?"

She raised herself instantly, with a smile on her face —a smile so completely and unmistakably artificial and put on for purposes of concealment, that it scared Everard almost more than her trouble did. "What, Everard!" she said, "is it you? This is a pleasure I was not looking for—" and she rose up and held out her

hands to him. There was some trace of redness about her eyes; but it looked more like want of rest than tears; and as her manner was manifestly put on, a certain jauntiness, quite unlike Miss Susan, had got into it. The smile which she forced, by dint of the strong effort required to produce it, got exaggerated, and ran almost into a laugh; her head had a little nervous toss. A stranger would have said her manner was full of affectation. This was the strange aspect which her emotion took.

"What is the matter?" Everard repeated, taking her hands into his, and looking at her earnestly. "Is there bad news?"

"No, no; nothing of the kind. I had a little attack of—that old pain I used to suffer from—neuralgia, I suppose. As one gets older one dislikes owning to rheumatism. No, no, no bad news; a little physical annoyance—nothing more."

Everard tried hard to recollect what the "old pain" was, but could not succeed in identifying anything of the kind with the always vigorous Miss Susan. She interrupted his reflections by saying, with a very jaunty and, what was meant to be, easy air, "Have you seen my visitors? You must have met them in the Priory Lane."

"An old Frenchman, with a funny little child clasped round his neck," said Everard, to whose simple English understanding all foreigners were Frenchmen, "and a very handsome young woman. Do they belong here? I did meet them, and could not make them out. The old man looked a genial old soul. I liked to see him with the child. Your visitors! Where did you pick them up?"

"These are very important people to the house and to the race," said Miss Susan with once more, so to speak, a flutter of her wings. "They are—but, come, guess; does nothing whisper to you who they are?"

"How should it?" said Everard, in his dissatisfaction with Miss Susan's strange demeanour, growing somewhat angry. "What have such people to do with you? The old fellow is nice-looking enough, and the woman really handsome; but they don't seem the kind of people one would expect to see here."

Miss Susan made a pause, smiling again in that same sickly forced way. "They say it is always good for a race when it comes back to the people, to the wholesome common stock, after a great many generations of useless gentlefolk. These are the Austins of Bruges, Everard, whom you hunted all over the world. They are simple

Belgian tradespeople, but at the same time Austins, pur sang."

"The Austins of Bruges?"

"Yes; come over on a visit. It was very kind of them, though we are beginning to tire of each other. The old man, M. Guillaume, he whom Farrel thought he had done away with; and his daughter-in-law, a young widow, and the little child, who is—the heir."

"The heir?—of the shop, you mean, I suppose."

"I do nothing of the kind, Everard, and it is unkind of you not to understand. The next heir to Whiteladies."

"Bah!" said Everard. "Make your mind easy, Aunt Susan. Herbert will marry before he has been six months at home. I know Herbert. He has been helpless and dependent so long, that the moment he has a chance of proving himself a man by the glorious superiority of having a wife, he will do it. Poor fellow! after you have been led about and domineered over all your life, of course you want, in your turn, to domineer over some one. See if my words don't come true."

"So that is your idea of marriage—to domineer over some one! Poor creatures!" said Miss Susan compassionately; "you will soon find out the difference. I

hope he may, Everard—I hope he may. He shall have my blessing, I promise you, and willing consent. To be quit of that child and its heirship, and know there was some one who had a real right to the place—Good heavens, what would I not give!"

"It appears, then, you don't admire those good people from Bruges?"

"Oh, I have nothing to say against them," said Miss Susan, faltering—"nothing! The old man is highly respectable, and Madame Austin le jeune, is—very nice-looking. They are quite nice sort of people—for their station in life."

"But you are tired of them," said Everard with a laugh.

"Well, perhaps to say tired is too strong an expression," said Miss Susan, with a panting at the throat which belied her calm speech. "But we have little in common, as you may suppose. We don't know what to say to each other; that is the great drawback at all times between the different classes. Their ideas are different from ours. Besides, they are foreign, which makes more difference still."

"I have come to stay till Monday, if you will have me," said Everard; "so I shall be able to judge for

myself. I thought the young woman was very pretty. Is there a Monsieur Austin le jeune? A widow! Oh, then you may expect her, if she stays, to turn a good many heads."

Miss Susan gave him a searching, wondering look. "You are mistaken," she said. "She is not anything so wonderful; good-looking, even handsome—but not a beauty to turn men's heads."

"We shall see," said Everard lightly. "And now tell me what news you have of the travellers. They don't write to me now."

"Why?" said Miss Susan, eager to change the subject, and, besides, very ready to take an interest in anything that concerned the intercourse between Everard and Reine.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "Somehow we are not so intimate as we were. Reine told me, indeed, the last time she wrote that it was unnecessary to write so often, now Herbert was well—as if that was all I cared for!" These last words were said low, after a pause, and there was a tone of indignation and complaint in them, subdued yet perceptible, which, even in the midst of her trouble, was balm to Miss Susan's ear.

"Reine is a capricious child," she said with a passing gleam of enjoyment. "You saw a great deal of them before you went to Jamaica. But that is nearly two years since," she added maliciously; "many changes have taken place since then."

"That is true," said Everard. And it was still more true, though he did not say so, that the change had not all been on Reine's part. He, too, had been capricious, and two or three broken and fugitive flirtations had occurred in his life since that day when, deeply *émotionné*, and not knowing how to keep his feelings to himself, he had left Reine in the little Alpine valley. That Alpine valley already looked very far off to him; but he should have preferred, on the whole, to find its memory and influence more fresh with Reine. He framed his lips unconsciously to a whistle as he submitted to Miss Susan's examination, which meant to express that he didn't care, that if Reine chose to be indifferent and forgetful, why, he could be indifferent too. Fortunately, however, he remembered, before any sound became audible, that to whistle was indecorous, and forbore.

"And how are your own affairs going on?" said Miss Susan; "we have not had any conversation on the subject since you came back. Well? I am glad to hear it.

You have not really been a loser, then, by your fright and your hard work?"

"Rather a gainer on the whole," said Everard; "besides the amusement. Work is not such a bad thing when you are forced to it. If ever I am in great need or take a panic again, I shall enjoy it. It takes up one's thoughts."

"Then why don't you go on, having made a beginning?" said Miss Susan. "You are well off for a young man, Everard; but suppose you were to marry? And now that you have made a beginning and got over the worst, I wish you would go on."

"I don't think I shall ever marry," said Everard with a vague smile creeping about the corners of his lips.

"Very likely! You should have gone on, Everard. A little more money never comes amiss; and as you really like work——"

"When I am forced to it," he said, laughing. "I am not forced now; that makes all the difference. You don't expect a young man of the nineteenth century, brought up as I have been, to go to work in cold blood without a motive? No, no, that is too much."

"If you please, ma'am," said Martha, coming in, "Stevens wishes to know if the foreign lady and gentle-

man is staying over Sunday? And Cook wishes to say, please——"

A shadow came over Miss Susan's face. She forgot the appearances which she had been keeping up with Everard. The colour went out of her cheeks; her eyes grew dull and dead, as if the life had died out of them. She put up her hands to stop this further demand upon her.

"They cannot go on Sunday, of course," she said, "and it is too late to go to-day. Stevens knows that as well as I do, and so do you all. Of course they mean to stay."

"And if you please, ma'am, Cook says, the baby——"

"No more, please, no more!" cried Miss Susan faintly. "I shall come presently and talk to Cook."

"You want to get rid of these people," said Everard sympathetically, startled by her look. "You don't like them, Aunt Susan, whatever you may say."

"I hate them!" she said low under her breath, with a tone of feeling so intense that he was alarmed by it. Then she recovered herself suddenly, chased the cloud from her face, and fell back into the jaunty manner which had so much surprised and almost shocked him before. "Of course I don't mean that," she said with a

laugh. "Even I have caught your fashion of exaggeration; but I don't love them, indeed, and I think a Sunday with them in the house is a very dismal affair to look forward to. Go and dress, Everard; there is the bell. I must speak to Cook."

While this conversation had been going on in-doors, the two foreigners thus discussed were walking up and down Priory Lane, in close conversation still. They did not hear the dressing-bell, or did not care for it. As for Giovanna, she had never yet troubled herself to ask what the preliminary bell meant. She had not dresses to change, and having no acquaintance with the habit which prescribed this alteration of costume in the evening, made no attempt to comply with it. The child clung about M. Guillaume's neck, and gave power to his arguments, though it nearly strangled him with its close clasp. "My good Giovanna," he said, "why put yourself in opposition to all your friends? We are your friends, though you will not think so. This darling, the light of our eyes, you will not steal him from us? Yes, my own! it is of thee I speak. The blessed infant knows; look how he holds me! You would not deprive me of him, my daughter—my dear child?"

"I should not steal him, anyhow," said the young

woman with an exultation which he thought cruel. "He is mine."

"Yes, I know. I have always respected thy right, chérie; you know I have. When thy mother-in-law would have had me take authority over him, I have said, 'No; she is his mother; the right is with her'—always, ma fille! I ask thee as a favour—I do not command thee, though some, you know, might think——. Listen, my child. The little one will be nothing but a burden to you in the world. If you should wish to go away, to see new faces, to be independent, though it is so strange for a woman, yet think, my child, the little one would be a burden. You have not the habits of our Gertrude, who understands children. Leave thy little one with us! You will then be free to go where you will."

"And you will be rid of me!" cried the young woman with passionate scorn. "Ah, I know you! I know what you mean. To get the child without me would be victory. My belle-mère would be glad, and Gertrude, who understands children! Understand me, then, mon beau-père. The child is my power. I shall never leave hold of him; he is my power. By him I can revenge myself; without him I am nobody, and you do not fear me. Give my baby to me!"

She seized the child, who struggled to keep his hold, and dragged him out of his grandfather's arms. The little fellow had his mouth open to cry, when she deftly filled it with her handkerchief, and setting him down forcibly on his little legs, shook him into frightened silence. "Cry, and I will beat thee!" she said. Then turning to the grandfather, who was remonstrating and entreating, "He shall walk; he is big enough; he shall not be carried, nor spoiled, as you would spoil him. Listen, bon papa. I have not anything else to keep my own part with; but *he* is mine."

"Giovanna! Giovanna! think less of thyself and more of thy child!"

"When I find you set me a good example," she said. "Is it not your comfort you seek, caring nothing for mine? Get rid of me, and keep the child! Ah, I perceive my belle-mère in that! But it is his interest to be here. Ces dames, though they don't love us, are kind enough. And listen to me; they will never give you the rente you demand for the boy—never! but if he stays here and I stay here, they will not turn us out. Ah, no. Madame Suzanne dares not turn me out! See, then, the reason of what I am doing. You love the child, but you do not wish a burden; and if you

take him away, it will be as a burden; they will never give you a sou for him. But leave us here, and they will be forced to nourish us and lodge us. Ah, you perceive! I am not without reason; I know what I do."

M. Guillaume was staggered. Angry as he was to have the child dragged from his arms, and dismayed as he was by Giovanna's indifference to its fright and tears, there was still something in this argument which compelled his attention. It was true that the subject of an allowance for the baby's maintenance and education had been of late very much talked of at Bruges, and the family had unanimously concluded that it was a right and necessary thing, and the letter making the claim had begun to be concocted, when Giovanna, stung by some quarrel, had suddenly taken the matter into her own hands. To take back the child would be sweet; but to take it back pensionless and almost hopeless, with its heirship rendered uncertain, and its immediate claims denied, would not be sweet. M. Guillaume was torn in twain by conflicting sentiments, his paternal feelings struggling against a very strong desire to make what could be honestly made out of Whiteladies, and to have the baby provided for. His wife was eager to have the

child, but would she be as eager if she knew that it was totally penniless, and had only visionary expectations? Would not she complain more and more of Giovanna, who did nothing, and even of the child itself, another mouth to be fed? This view of the subject silenced and confounded him. "If I could hope that thou wouldest be kind!" he said, faltering, eyeing the poor baby, over whom his heart yearned. His heart yearned over the child; and yet he felt it would be something of a triumph could he *exploiter* Miss Susan, and transfer an undesirable burden from his own shoulders to hers. Surely this was worth doing, after her English coldness, her aristocratic contempt. M. Guillaume did not like to be looked down upon. He had been wounded in his pride and hurt in his tender feelings; and now he could be revenged on her! He put his hand on Giovanna's shoulder, and drew closer to her, and they held a consultation with their heads together, which was only interrupted by the appearance of Stevens, very dark and solemn, who begged to ask if they were aware that the dinner-bell had rung full five minutes before?

CHAPTER XII.

THE dinner-table in the old hall was surrounded by a very odd party that night. Miss Susan, at the head of the table, in the handsome matronly evening dress which she took to always at the beginning of winter, did her best to look as usual, though she could not quite keep the panting of her breast from being visible under her black silk and lace. She was breathless, as if she had been running hard; this was the form her agitation took. Miss Augustine, at the other end of the table, sat motionless, absorbed in her own thoughts, and quite unmoved by what was going on around her. Everard had one side to himself, from which he watched with great curiosity the pair opposite to him, who came in abruptly — Giovanna, with her black hair slightly ruffled by the wind, and M. Guillaume, rubbing his bald head. This was all the toilette they had made. The meal began almost in silence, with a few remarks only between Miss Susan and Everard. M. Guillaume was

preoccupied. Giovanna was at no time disposed for much conversation. Miss Susan, however, after a little interval, began to talk significantly, so as to attract the strangers.

"You said you had not heard lately from Herbert," she said, addressing her young cousin. "You don't know, then, I suppose, that they have made all their plans for coming home?"

"Not before the winter, I hope."

"Oh, no, not before the winter—in May, when we hope it will be quite safe. They are coming home, not for a visit, but to settle. And we must think of looking for a house," said Miss Susan, with a smile and a sigh.

"Do you mean that you—you who have been mistress of Whiteladies for so long—that you will leave Whiteladies? They will never allow that," said Everard.

Miss Susan looked him meaningly in the face, with a gleam of her eye towards the strangers on the other side of the table. How could he tell what meaning she wished to convey to him? Men are not clever at interpreting such communications in the best of circumstances, and, perfectly ignorant as he was of the circumstances, how could Everard make out what she wanted? But the look silenced and left him gaping with

his mouth open, feeling that something was expected of him, and not knowing what to say.

"Yes, that is my intention," said Miss Susan, with the jaunty air which had so perplexed and annoyed him before. "When Herbert comes home, he has his sister with him to keep his house. I should be superseded. I should be merely a lodger or a visitor in Whiteladies, and that I could not put up with. I shall go, of course."

"But, Aunt Susan, Reine would never think—Herbert would never permit——"

Another glance, still more full of meaning, but of meaning quite beyond Everard's grasp, stopped him again. What could she want him to do or say? he asked himself. What could she be thinking of?

"The thing is settled," said Miss Susan; "of course we must go. The house and everything in it belongs to Herbert. He will marry, of course. Did not you say to me this very afternoon that he was sure to marry?"

"Yes," Everard answered faintly; "but——"

"There is no but," she replied, with almost a triumphant air. "It is a matter of course. I shall feel leaving the old house, but I have no right to it, it is not

mine, and I do not mean to make any fuss. In six months from this time, if all is well, we shall be out of Whiteladies."

She said this with again a little toss of her head, as if in satisfaction. Giovanna and M. Guillaume exchanged alarmed glances. The words were taking effect.

"Is it settled?" said Augustine calmly. "I did not know things had gone so far. The question now is, who will Herbert marry? We once talked of this in respect to you, Everard, and I told you my views—I should say my wishes. Herbert has been restored as by a miracle. He ought to be very thankful—he ought to show his gratitude. But it depends much upon the kind of woman he marries. I thought once in respect to you——"

"Austine, we need not enter into these questions before strangers," said Miss Susan.

"It does not matter who is present," said Augustine. "Every one knows what my life is, and what is the curse of our house."

"Pardon, ma sœur," said M. Guillaume. "I am of the house, but I do not know."

"Ah!" said Augustine, looking at him. "After Herbert, you represent the elder branch? it is true; but you

have not a daughter who is young, under twenty, have you? that is what I want to know."

"I have three daughters, ma sœur," said M. Guillaume, delighted to find a subject on which he could expatiate; "all very good—gentilles, kind to every one. There is Madeleine, who is the wife of M. Meeren, the jeweller—François Meeren, the eldest son, very well off; and Marie, who is settled at Courtray, whose husband has a great manufactory; and Gertrude, my youngest, who has married my partner—they will succeed her mother and me when our day is over. Ma sœur knows that my son died? Yes; these are misfortunes that all have to bear. This is my family. They are very good women, though I say it—pious, and good mothers and wives, and obedient to their husbands and kind to the poor."

Augustine continued to look at him, but the animation had faded out of her eyes. "Men's wives are of little interest to me," she said. "What I want is one who is young, and who would understand and do what I say."

Here Giovanna got up from her chair, pushing it back with a force which almost made Stevens drop the dish he was carrying. "Me!" she cried, with a gleam of

malice in her eyes, "me, ma sœur! I am younger than Gertrude and the rest. I am no one's wife. Let it be me."

Augustine looked at her with curious scrutiny, measuring her from head to foot, as it were; while Miss Susan, horror-stricken at once by the discussion and the indecorum, looked on breathless. Then Augustine turned away.

"*You* could not be Herbert's wife," she said, with her usual abstract quiet; and added softly, "I must ask for enlightenment. I shall speak to my people at the Almshouses to-morrow. We have done so much. His life has been given to us; why not the family salvation too?"

"These are questions which had better not be discussed at the dinner-table," said Miss Susan, "a place where in England we don't think it right to indulge in expressions of feeling. Madame Jean, I am afraid you are surprised by my sister's ways. In the family we all know what she means exactly; but outside the family——"

"I am one of the family," said Giovanna, leaning back in her chair, on which she had reseated herself. She put up her hands, and clasped them behind her head in an

attitude which was of the easiest and freest description. "I eat no more, thank you, take it away; though the cuisine is better than my belle-mère's, bon papa; but I cannot eat for ever, like you English. Oh, I am one of the family. I understand also, and I think—there are things that come into my head."

Miss Susan gave her a look which was full of fright and dislike, but not of understanding. Everard only, thought he caught for a moment the gleam of sudden malicious meaning in her eyes. She laughed a low laugh, and looked at him across the table, yawning and stretching her arms, which were hidden by her black sleeves, but which Everard divined to be beautiful ones, somewhat large, but fine and shapely. His eye sought hers half unwillingly, attracted in spite of himself. How full of life and youth and warmth and force she looked among all these old people! Even her careless gestures, her want of breeding, over which Stevens was groaning, seemed to make it more evident; and he thought to himself, with a shudder, that he understood what was in her eye.

But none of the old people thought the rude young woman worth notice. Her father-in-law pulled her skirt sharply under the table, to recall her to "her manners,"

and she laughed, but did not alter her position. Miss Susan was horrified and angry, but her indignation went no further. She turned to the old linendraper with elaborate politeness.

"I am afraid you will find our English Sunday dull," she said. "You know we have different ideas from those you have abroad; and if you want to go to-morrow, travelling is difficult on Sunday—though to be sure we might make an effort."

"Pardon, I have no intention of going to-morrow," said M. Guillaume. "I have been thinking much—and after dinner I will disclose to Madame what my thoughts have been."

Miss Susan's bosom swelled with suspense and pain. "That will do, Stevens, that will do," she said.

He had been wandering round and round the table for about an hour, she thought, with sweet dishes of which there was an unusual and unnecessary abundance, and which no one tasted. She felt sure, as people always do, when they are aware of something to conceal, that he lingered so long on purpose to spy out what he could of the mystery; and now her heart beat with feverish desire to know what was the nature of M. Guillaume's thoughts. Why did not he say plainly,

"We are going on Monday?" That would have been a hundred times better than any thoughts.

"It will be well if you will come to the Almshouses to-morrow," said Miss Augustine, once more taking the conduct of the conversation into her hands. "It will be well for yourself to show at least that you understand what the burden of the family is. Perhaps good thoughts will be put into your head; perhaps, as you are the next in succession of our family—ah! I must think of that. You are an old man; you cannot be ambitious," she said, slowly and calmly; "nor love the world as others do."

"You flatter me, ma sœur," said M. Guillaume. "I should be proud to deserve your commendation; but I am ambitious. Not for myself—for me it is nothing; but if this child were the master here, I should die happy. It is what I wish for most."

"That is," said Miss Susan, with rising colour (and oh how thankful she was for some feasible pretext by which to throw off a little of the rising tide of feeling within her!)—"that is—what M. Guillaume Austin wishes for most is, that Herbert, our boy, whom God has spared, should get worse again, and die."

The old man looked up at her, startled, having, like

so many others, thought innocently enough of what was most important to himself, without considering how it told upon the others. Giovanna, however, put herself suddenly in the breach.

"I," she cried, with another quick change of movement—"I am the child's mother, Madame Suzanne, you know; yet I do not wish this. Listen. I drink to the health of M. Herbert!" she cried, lifting up the nearest glass of wine, which happened to be her father-in-law's; "that he comes home well and strong, that he takes a wife, that he lives long! I carry this to his health. Vive M. Herbert!" she cried, and drank the wine, which brought a sudden flush to her cheeks, and lighted up her eyes.

They all gazed at her—I cannot say with what disapproval and secret horror in their elderly calm; except Everard, who, always ready to admire a pretty woman, felt a sudden enthusiasm take possession of him. He, oddly enough, was the only one to understand her meaning; but how handsome she was! how splendid the glow in her eyes! He looked across the table, and bowed and pledged her. He was the only one who did not look at her with disapproval. Her beauty conciliated the young man, in spite of himself.

"Drinking to him is a vain ceremony," said Augustine; "but if you were to practise self-denial, and get up early, and come to the Almshouses every morning with me——"

"I will," said Giovanna quickly, "I will! every morning, if ma sœur will permit me——"

"I do not suppose that every morning can mean much in Madame Jean's case," said Miss Susan stiffly, "as no doubt she will be returning home before long."

"Do not check the young woman, Susan, when she shows good dispositions," said Augustine. "It is always good to pray. You are worldly-minded yourself, and do not think as I do; but when I can find one to feel with me, that makes me happy. She may stay longer than you think."

Miss Susan could not restrain a low exclamation of dismay. Everard, looking at her, saw that her face began to wear that terrible look of conscious impotence —helpless and driven into a corner, which is so unendurable to the strong. She was of more personal importance individually than all the tormentors who surrounded her, but she was powerless, and could do nothing against them. Her cheeks flushed hot under

her eyes, which seemed scorched, and dazzled too, by this burning of shame. He said something to her in a low tone, to call off her attention, and perceived that the strong woman, generally mistress of the situation, whatever it might be, was unable to answer him out of sheer emotion. Fortunately, by this time the dessert was on the table, and she rose abruptly. Augustine, slower, rose too. Giovanna, however, sat still composedly by her father-in-law's side.

"The bon papa has not finished his wine," she said, pointing to him.

"Madame Jean," said Miss Susan, "in England you must do as English ladies do. I cannot permit anything else in my house."

It was not that she was excited and angry, but that this was a mode of throwing forth a little of the excitement which, moment by moment, was getting more than she could bear. Giovanna, after another look, got up and obeyed her without a word.

"So this is the mode anglaise!" said the old man when they were gone; "it is not polite; it is to show, I suppose, that we are not welcome; but Madame Suzanne need not give herself the trouble. If she will do her duty to her relations, I do not mean to stay."

"I do not know what the question is," said Everard; "but she always does her duty by everybody, and you need not be afraid."

On this hint M. Guillaume began, and told Everard the whole matter, filling him with perplexity. The story of Miss Susan's visit sounded strangely enough, though the simple narrator knew nothing of its worst consequences; but he told his interested auditor how she had tempted him to throw up his bargain with Farrel-Austin, and raised hopes which now she seemed little inclined to realise; and the story was not agreeable to Everard's ear. Farrel-Austin, no doubt, had begun this curious oblique dealing; but Farrel-Austin was a man from whom little was expected, and Everard had been used to expect much from Miss Susan. But he did not know, all the time, that he was driving her almost mad, keeping back the old man, who had promised that evening to let her know the issue of his thoughts. She was sitting in a corner, speechless and rigid with agitation, when the two came in from the dining-room to "join the ladies;" and even then Everard, in his ignorance, would have seated himself beside her, to postpone the explanation still longer. "Go away! go away!" she said to him in a wild whisper. What could she mean? for certainly

there could be nothing tragical connected with this old man, or so at least Everard thought.

"Madame will excuse me, I hope," said Guillaume blandly; "as it is the mode anglaise, I endeavoured to follow it, though it seems little polite. But it is not for one country to condemn the ways of the other. If Madame wishes it, I will now say the result of my thoughts."

Miss Susan, who was past speaking, nodded her head, and did her best to form her lips into a smile.

"Madame informs me," said M. Guillaume, "that Monsieur Herbert is better, that the chances of le petit are small, and that there is no one to give to the child the rente, the allowance, that is his due?"

"That is true, quite true."

"On the other hand," said M. Guillaume, "Giovanna has told me her ideas—she will not come away with me. What she says is that her boy has a right to be here; and she will not leave Viteladies. What can I say? Madame perceives that it is not easy to change the ideas of Giovanna when she has made up her mind."

"But what has her mind to do with it," cried Miss Susan, in despair, "when it is you who have the power?"

"Madame is right, of course," said the old shopkeeper;

"it is I who have the power. I am the father, the head of the house. Still, a good father is not a tyrant, Madame Suzanne; a good father hears reason. Giovanna says to me, 'It is well; if le petit has no right, it is for M. le Propriétaire to say so.' She is not without acuteness, madame will perceive. What she says is, 'If Madame Suzanne cannot provide for le petit—will not make him any allowance—and tells us that she has nothing to do with Viteladies—then it is best to wait until they come who have to do with it. M. Herbert returns in May. Eh bien! she will remain till then, that M. Herbert, who must know best, may decide.'"

Miss Susan was thunderstruck. She was driven into silence, paralyzed by this intimation. She looked at the old shopkeeper with a dumb agony of terror and appeal in her face, which moved him, though he did not understand.

"Mon Dieu! madame," he cried, "can I help it? it is not I; I am without power!"

"But she shall not stay—I cannot have her; I will not have her!" cried Miss Susan, in her dismay.

M. Guillaume said nothing, but he beckoned his stepdaughter from the other end of the room.

"Speak for thyself," he said. "Thou art not wanted

here, nor thy child either. It would be better to return with me."

Giovanna looked Miss Susan full in the eyes, with an audacious smile.

"Madame Suzanne will not send me away," she said; "I am sure she will not send me away."

Miss Susan felt herself caught in the toils. She looked from one to another with despairing eyes. She might appeal to the old man, but she knew it was hopeless to appeal to the young woman, who stood over her with determination in every line of her face, and conscious power gleaming from her eyes. She subdued herself by an incalculable effort.

"I thought," she said, faltering, "that it would be happier for you to go back to your home—that to be near your friends would please you. It may be comfortable enough here, but you would miss the—society of your friends——"

"My mother-in-law?" said Giovanna, with a laugh. "Madame is too good to think of me. Yes, it is dull, I know; but for the child I overlook that. I will stay till M. Herbert comes. The bon papa is fond of the child, but he loves his rente, and will leave us when we are penniless. I will stay till M. Herbert returns, who

must govern everything. Madame Suzanne will not contradict me—otherwise I shall have no choice, I shall be forced to go to M. Herbert to tell him all."

Miss Susan sat still and listened. She had to keep silence, though her heart beat so that it seemed to be escaping out of her sober breast, and the blood filled her veins to bursting. Heaven help her! here was her punishment. Fiery passion blazed in her, but she durst not betray it; and to keep it down—to keep it silent—was all she was able to do. She answered, faltering—

"You are mistaken; you are mistaken! Herbert will do nothing. Besides, some one could write and tell you what he says."

"Pardon! but I move not; I leave not," said Giovanna. She enjoyed the triumph. "I am a mother," she said; "Madame Suzanne knows? and mothers sacrifice everything for the good of their children—everything: eh bien! I am able for the sacrifice;" and she looked down upon Miss Susan with a gleam almost of laughter—of fun, humour, and malicious amusement in her eyes.

To reason with this creature was like dashing oneself against a stone wall. She was impregnable in her resolution. Miss Susan, feeling the blow go to her heart,

pushed her chair back into the corner, and hid herself, as it were. It was a dark corner, where her face was in comparative darkness.

"I cannot struggle with you," she said, in a piteous whisper, feeling her lips too parched and dry for another word.

CHAPTER XIII.

"GOING to stay till Herbert comes back! but, my dear Aunt Susan, since you don't want her—and of course you don't wan't her—why don't you say so?" cried Everard. "An unwelcome guest may be endured for a day or two, or a week or two, but for five or six months——"

"My dear," said Miss Susan, who was pale, and in whose vigorous frame a tremble of weakness seemed so out of place, "how can I say so? It would be so—discourteous—so uncivil——"

The young man looked at her with dismay. He would have laughed had she not been so deadly serious. Her face was white and drawn, her lips quivered slightly as she spoke. She looked all at once a weak old woman, tremulous, broken down and uncertain of herself.

"You must be ill," he said. "I can't believe it is you I am speaking to. You ought to see the doctor, Aunt Susan—you cannot be well."

"Perhaps," she said with a pitiful attempt at a smile, "perhaps. Indeed you must be right, Everard, for I don't feel like myself. I am getting old, you know."

"Nonsense!" he said lightly, "you were as young as any of us last time I was here."

"Ah!" said Miss Susan with her quivering lips, "I have kept that up too long. I have gone on being young—and now all at once I am old; that is how it is."

"But that does not make any difference in my argument," said Everard; "if you are old—which I don't believe—the less reason is there for having you vexed. You don't like this guest who is going to inflict herself upon you. *I* shouldn't mind her," he added, with a laugh; "she's very handsome, Aunt Susan; but I don't suppose that affects you in the same way; and she will be quite out of place when Herbert comes, or at least when Reine comes. I advise you to tell her plainly, before the old fellow goes, that it won't do."

"I can't, my dear—I can't!" said Miss Susan; how her lips quivered!—"she is in my house, she is my guest, and I can't say, 'Go away.'"

"Why not? She is not a person of very fine feelings, to be hurt by it. She is not even a lady; and till May, till the end of May! you will never be able to endure her."

"Oh yes, I shall," said Miss Susan. "I see you think that I am very weak; but I never was uncivil to any one, Everard, not to any one! in my own house. It is Herbert's house, of course," she added quickly, "but yet it has been mine, though I never had any real right to it, for so many years."

"And you really mean to leave now?"

"I suppose so," said Miss Susan faltering, "I think, probably—nothing is settled. Don't be too hard upon me, Everard! I said so—for them, to show them that I had no power."

"Then why, for heaven's sake, if you have so strong a feeling—why, for the sake of politeness!—politeness is absurd, Aunt Susan," said Everard. "Do you mean to say that if any saucy fellow, any cad I may have met, chose to come into my house and take possession, I should not kick him out because it would be uncivil? This is not like your good sense. You must have some other reason. No! do you mean No by that shake of the head? Then if it is so very disagreeable to you, let me speak to her. Let me suggest——"

"Not for the world," cried Miss Susan. "No, for pity's sake, no. You will make me frantic if you speak of such a thing."

"Or to the old fellow," said Everard; "he ought to see the absurdity of it, and the tyranny."

She caught at this evidently with a little hope. "You may speak to Monsieur Guillaume if you feel disposed," she said; "yes, you may speak to him. I blame him very much; he ought not to have listened to her; he ought to have taken her away at once."

"How could he if she wouldn't go? Men no doubt are powerful beings," said Everard laughing, "but suppose the other side declined to be moved? Even a horse at the water, if it declines to drink—you know the proverb."

"Oh, don't worry me with proverbs—as if I had not enough without that!" she said with an impatience which would have been comic had it not been so tragical. "Yes, Everard, yes, if you like you may speak to *him*—but not to her; not a word to her for the world. My dear boy, my dear boy! you won't go against me in this?"

"Of course I shall do only what you wish me to do," he said more gravely; the sight of her agitation troubled the young man exceedingly. To think of any concealed feeling, any mystery in connection with Susan Austin, seemed not only a blasphemy, but an absurdity.

Yet what could she mean, what could her strange terror, her changed looks, her agitated aspect, mean? Everard was more disturbed than he could say.

This was on the Sunday afternoon, that hour of all others when clouds hang heaviest and troubles, where they exist, come most into the foreground. The occupations of ordinary life push them aside, but Sunday, which is devoted to rest, and in which so many people honestly endeavour to put the trifling little cares of every day out of their minds, always lays hold of those bigger disturbers of existence which it is the aim of our lives to forget. Miss Susan would have made a brave fight against the evil which she could not avoid on another day, but this day, with all its many associations of quiet, its outside tranquillity, its peaceful recollections and habits, was too much for her. Everard had found her walking in the Priory Lane by herself, a bitter dew of pain in her eyes, and a tremble in her lips which frightened him. She had come out to collect her thoughts a little, and to escape from her visitors, who sometimes seemed for the moment more than she could bear.

Miss Augustine came up on her way from the afternoon service at the Almshouses, while Everard spoke.

She was accompanied by Giovanna, and it was a curious sight to see the tall, slight figure of the Grey sister, type of everything abstract and mystic, with that other by her side, full of strange vitality, watching the absorbed and dreamy creature with those looks of investigation, puzzled to know what her meaning was, but determined somehow to be at the bottom of it. Giovanna's eyes darted a keen telegraphic communication to Everard's as they came up. This glance seemed to convey at once an opinion and an inquiry. "How droll she is! Is she mad? I am finding her out," the eyes said. Everard carefully refrained from making any reply; though indeed this was self-denial on his part, for Giovanna certainly made Whiteladies more amusing than it had been when he was last there.

"You have been to church?" said Miss Susan, with her forced and reluctant smile.

"She went with me," said Miss Augustine. "I hope we have a great acquisition in her. Few have understood me so quickly. If anything should happen to Herbert——"

"Nothing is going to happen to Herbert," cried Miss Susan. "God bless him! It sounds as if you were putting a spell upon our boy."

"I put no spell; I don't even understand such profane words. My heart is set on one thing, and it is of less importance how it is carried out. If anything should happen to Herbert, I believe I have found one who sees the necessity as I do, and who will sacrifice herself for the salvation of the race."

"One who will sacrifice herself!" Miss Susan gasped wildly under her breath.

Giovanna looked at her with defiance, challenging her, as it were, to a mortal struggle; yet there was a glimmer of laughter in her eyes. She looked at Miss Susan from behind the back of the other, and made a slow solemn courtesy as Augustine spoke. Her eyes were dancing with a humorous enjoyment of the situation, with mischief and playfulness, yet with conscious power.

"This—lady?" said Miss Susan. "I think you are mad; Austine, I think you are going mad!"

Miss Augustine shook her head. "Susan, how often do I tell you that you are giving your heart to Mammon and to the world! This is worse than madness. It makes you incapable of seeing spiritual things. Yes! she is capable of it. Heaven has sent her in answer to many prayers."

Saying this, Augustine glided past towards the house with her arms folded in her sleeves, and her abstract eyes fixed on the vacant air. A little flush of displeasure at the opposition had come upon her face as she spoke, but it faded as quickly as it came. As for Giovanna, before she followed her, she stopped and threw up her hands with an appealing gesture: "Is it then my fault?" she said as she passed.

Miss Susan stood and looked after them, her eyes dilating; a kind of panic was in her face. "Is it then God that has sent her, to support the innocent, to punish the guilty?" she said under her breath.

"Aunt Susan, take my arm; you are certainly ill."

"Yes, yes," she said faintly. "Take me in, take me out of sight, and never tell any one, Everard, never tell any one. I think I shall go out of my mind. It must be giving my thoughts to Mammon and the world, as she said."

"Never mind what she says," said Everard, "no one pays any attention to what she says. Your nerves are overwrought somehow or other, and you are ill. But I'll have it out with the old duffer!" cried the young man. They met Monsieur Guillaume immediately after, and I think he must have heard them; but he was hap-

pily quite unaware of the nature of a "duffer," or what the word meant, and to tell the truth, so am I.

Miss Susan was not able to come down to dinner, a marvellous and almost unheard of event, so that the party was still less lively than usual. Everard was so concerned about his old friend, and the strange condition in which she was, that he began his attack upon the old shopkeeper almost as soon as they were left alone. "Don't you think, sir," the young man began in a straightforward, unartificial way, "that it would be better to take your daughter-in-law with you? She will only be uncomfortable among people so different from those you have been accustomed to; I doubt if they will get on."

"Get on?" said Monsieur Guillaume pleasantly. "Get on what? She does not wish to get on anywhere. She wishes to stay here."

"I mean, they are not likely to be comfortable together, to agree, to be friends."

M. Guillaume shrugged his shoulders. "Mon Dieu," he said, "it will not be my fault. If Madame Suzanne will not grant the little *rente*, the allowance I demanded for le petit, is it fit that he should be at my charge? He was not thought of till Madame

Suzanne came to visit us. There is nothing for him. He was born to be the heir here."

"But Miss Austin could have nothing to do with his being born," cried Everard laughing. Poor Miss Susan, it seemed the drollest thing to lay to her charge. But M. Guillaume did not see the joke, he went on seriously.

"And I had made my little arrangement with M. Farrel. We were in accord, all was settled; so much to come to me on the spot, and this heritage, this old château—château, mon Dieu, a thing of wood and brick!—to him, eventually. But when Madame Suzanne arrived to tell us of the beauties of this place, and when the women among them made discovery of the petit, that he was about to be born, the contract was broken with M. Farrel. I lost the money—and now I lose the heritage; and it is I who must provide for le petit! Monsieur, such a thing was never heard of. It is incredible; and Madame Suzanne thinks, I am to carry off the child without a word, and take this disappointment tranquilly! But no! I am not a fool, and it cannot be."

"But I thought you were very fond of the child, and were in despair at losing him," said Everard.

"Yes, yes," cried the old shopkeeper, "despair is

one thing, and good sense is another. This is contrary to good sense. Giovanna is an obstinate, but she has good sense. They will not give le petit anything: eh bien, let them bear the expense of him! That is what she says."

"Then the allowance is all you want?" said Everard, with British brevity. This seemed to him the easiest of arrangements. With his mind quite relieved, and a few jokes laid up for the amusement of the future, touching Miss Susan's powers and disabilities, he strolled into the drawing-room, M. Guillaume preferring to betake himself to bed. The drawing-room of Whiteladies had never looked so thoroughly unlike itself. There seemed to Everard at first to be no one there, but after a minute he perceived a figure stretched out upon a sofa. The lamps were very dim, throwing a sort of twilight glimmer through the room; and the fire was very red, adding a rosy hue, but no more, to this faint illumination. It was the sort of light favourable to talk, or to meditation, or to slumber, but by aid of which neither reading, nor work, nor any active occupation could be pursued. This was of itself sufficient to mark the absence of Miss Susan, for whom a cheerful full light of animation and activity seemed

always necessary. The figure on the sofa lay at full length, with an *abandon* of indolence and comfort which suited the warm atmosphere and subdued light. Everard felt a certain appropriateness in the scene altogether, but it was not Whiteladies. An Italian palace or an eastern harem would have been more in accordance with the presiding figure. She raised her head, however, as he approached, supporting herself on her elbow, with a vivacity unlike the eastern calm, and looked at him by the dim light with a look half provoking half inviting, which attracted the foolish young man more perhaps than a more correct demeanour would have done. Why should not he try what he could do, Everard thought, to move the rebel? for he had an internal conviction that even the allowance which would satisfy M. Guillaume would not content Giovanna. He drew a chair to the other side of the table upon which the tall dim lamp was standing, and which was drawn close to the sofa on which the young woman lay.

"Do you really mean to remain at Whiteladies?" he said. "I don't think you can have any idea how dull it is here."

She shrugged her shoulders slightly and raised her

eyebrows. She had let her head drop back upon the sofa cushions, and the faint light threw a kind of dreamy radiance upon her fine features, and great glowing dark eyes.

"Dull! it is almost more than dull," he continued; though even as he spoke he felt that to have this beautiful creature in Whiteladies would be a sensible alleviation of the dulness, and that his effort on Miss Susan's behalf was of the most disinterested kind. "It would kill you, I fear; you can't imagine what it is in winter, when the days are short; the lamps are lit at half-past four, and nothing happens all the evening, no one comes. You sit before dinner round the fire, and Miss Austin knits; and after dinner you sit round the fire again, and there is not a sound in all the place, unless you have yourself the courage to make an observation; and it seems about a year before it is time to go to bed. You don't know what it is."

What Miss Susan would have said had she heard this account of those winter evenings, many of which the hypocrite had spent very cosily at Whiteladies, I prefer not to think. The idea occurred to himself with a comic panic. What would she say? He could scarcely keep from laughing as he asked himself the question.

"I have imagination," said Giovanna, stretching her arms. "I can see it all; but I should not endure it, me. I should get up and snap my fingers at them and dance, or sing."

"Ah!" said Everard, entering into the humour of his rôle, "so you think at present; but it would soon take the spirit out of you. I am very sorry for you, Madame Jean. If I were like you, with the power of enjoying myself, and having the world at my feet——"

"Ah! bah!" cried Giovanna, "how can one have the world at one's feet, when one is never seen? And you should see the shop at Bruges, mon Dieu! People do not come and throw themselves at one's feet there. I am not sure even if it is altogether the fault of Gertrude and the belle-mère; but here——"

"You will have no one to see you," said Everard, tickled by the part he was playing, and throwing himself into the spirit of it. "That is worse—for what is the good of being visible when there is no one to see?"

This consideration evidently was not without its effect. Giovanna raised herself lazily on her elbow and looked at him across the table. "You come," said she, 'and this 'Erbert."

"Herbert!" said Everard, shaking his head, "he is a sickly boy; and as for me—I have to pay my vows at other shrines," he added with a laugh. But he found this conversation immensely entertaining, and went on representing the disadvantages of Whiteladies with more enjoyment than perhaps he had ever experienced in that place on a Sunday evening before. He went on till Giovanna pettishly bade him go. "At the least, it is comfortable," she said. "Ah, go! It is very tranquil, there is no one to call to you with sharp voice like a knife, 'Gi'vanna! tu dors!' Go, I am going to sleep."

I don't suppose she meant him to take her at her word, for Giovanna was amused too, and found the young man's company and his compliments and that half-mocking, half-real mixture of homage and criticism to be a pleasant variety. But Everard, partly because he had exhausted all he had to say, partly lest he should be drawn on to say more, jumped up in a state of amusement and satisfaction with himself and his own cleverness which was very pleasant. "Since you send me away, I must obey," he said; "dormez, belle enchanteresse!" and with this, which he felt to be a very pretty speech indeed, he left the room more pleased

with himself than ever. He had spent a most satisfactory evening, he had ascertained that the old man was to be bought off with money, and he had done his best to disgust the young woman with a dull English country-house; in short, he had done Miss Susan yeoman's service, and amused himself at the same time. Everard was agreeably excited, and felt, after a few moments' reflection over a cigar on the lawn, that he would like to do more. It was still early, for the Sunday dinner at Whiteladies, as in so many other respectable English houses, was an hour earlier than usual; and as he wandered round the house, he saw the light still shining in Miss Susan's window. This decided him; he threw away the end of his cigar, and hastening up the great staircase three steps at once, hurried to Miss Susan's door. "Come in," she said faintly. Everard was as much a child of the house as Herbert and Reine, and had received many an admonition in that well-known chamber. He opened the door without hesitation. But there was something in the very atmosphere which he felt to daunt him as he went in.

Miss Susan was seated in her easy chair by the bedside fully dressed. She was leaning her head back upon the high shoulder of the old-fashioned chair with her

eyes shut. She thought it was Martha who had come in, and she was not careful to keep up appearances with Martha, who had found out days before that something was the matter. She was almost ghastly in her paleness, and there was an utter languor of despair about her attitude and her look, which alarmed Everard in the highest degree. But he could not stop the first words that rose upon his lips, or subdue altogether the cheery tone which came naturally from his satisfied feelings. "Aunt Susan," he cried, "come along, come down-stairs, now's your time. I have been telling stories of Whiteladies to disgust her, and I believe now you could buy them off with a small annuity. Aunt Susan! forgive my noise, you are ill."

"No, no," she said with a gasp and a forlorn smile. "No, only tired. What did you say, Everard? whom am I to buy off?" This was a last effort at keeping up appearances. Then it seemed to strike her all at once that this was an ungrateful way of treating one who had been taking so much trouble on her account. "Forgive me, Everard," she said; "I have been dozing, and my head is muddled. Buy them off? To be sure, I should have thought of that; for an annuity,

after all, though I have no right to give it, is better than having them settled in the house."

"Far better, since you dislike them so much," said Everard; "I don't, for my part. She is not so bad. She is very handsome, and there's some fun in her."

"Fun!" Miss Susan rose up very tremulous and uncertain, and looking ten years older, with her face ashy pale, and a tottering in her steps, all brought about by this unwelcome visitor; and to hear of fun in connection with Giovanna, made her sharply, unreasonably angry for the time. "You should choose your words better at such a moment," she said.

"Never mind my words, come and speak to her," cried Everard. He was very curious and full of wonder, seeing there was something below the surface more than met his eyes, and that the mystery was far more mysterious than his idea of it. Miss Susan hesitated more than ever, and seemed as if she would have gone back before they reached the stairs; but he kept up her courage. "When it's only a little money, and you can afford it," he said. "You don't care so much for a little money."

"No, I don't care much for a little money," she repeated after him mechanically, as she went down-stairs.

CHAPTER XIV.

MISS SUSAN went into the drawing-room in the same dim light in which Everard had left it. She was irritable and impatient in her misery. She would have liked to turn up all the lamps, and throw a flood of light upon the stranger whose attitude on the sofa was equally indolent and indecorous. Why was she there at all? what right had she to extend herself at full length, to make herself so comfortable? That Giovanna should be comfortable did not do Miss Susan any further harm; but she felt as if it did, and a fountain of hot wrath surged up in her heart. This, however, she felt was not the way in which she could do any good, so she made an effort to restrain herself. She sat down in Everard's seat which he had left. She was not quite sure whether he himself were not lingering in the shadows at the door of the room, and this made her difficulty the greater in what she had to say.

"Do you like this darkness?" she asked. "It is oppressive; we cannot see to do anything."

"Me, I don't want to do anything," said Giovanna. "I sleep and I dream. This is most pleasant to me. Madame Suzanne loves occupation. Me, I do not."

"Yes," said Miss Susan with suppressed impatience, "that is one of the differences between us. But I have something to say to you; you wanted me to make an allowance for the child, and I refused. Indeed, it is not my business, for Whiteladies is not mine. But now that I have thought of it, I will consent. It would be so much better for you to travel with your father-in-law than alone."

Giovanna turned her face towards her companion with again that laughing devil in her eye. "Madame Suzanne mistakes. The bon papa spoke of his rente that he loves, not me. If ces dames will give me money to dress myself, to be more like them, that will be well; but it was the bon papa, not me."

"Never mind who it was," said Miss Susan, on the verge of losing her temper. "One or the other, I suppose it is all the same. I will give you your allowance."

"To dress myself? thanks, that will be well. Then

I can follow the mode anglaise, and have something to wear in the evening, like Madame Suzanne herself."

"For the child!" cried the suffering woman, in a voice which to Everard, behind backs, sounded like low and muffled thunder. "To support him and you, to keep you independent, to make you comfortable at home among your own people——"

"Merci!" cried Giovanna, shrugging her shoulders. "That is the bon papa's idea, as I tell madame, not mine. Comfortable! with my belle-mère! Listen, Madame Suzanne—I too, I have been thinking. If you will accept me with bounty, you shall not be sorry. I can make myself good; I can be useful, though it is not what I like best. I stay—I make myself your child——"

"I do not want you," cried Miss Susan, stung beyond her strength of self-control, "I do not want you. I will pay you anything to get you away."

Giovanna's eyes gave forth a gleam. "Très-bien," she said calmly. "Then I shall stay, if madame pleases or not. It is what I have intended from the beginning; and I do not change my mind, me."

"But if I say you shall not stay!" said Miss Susan,

wrought to fury, and pushing back her chair from the table.

Giovanna raised herself on her elbow, and leant across the table, fixing the other with her great eyes.

"Once more, très-bien," she said in a significant tone, too low for Everard to hear, but not a whisper. "Très-bien! Madame then wishes me to tell not only M. Herbert, but the bonne sœur, madame's sister, and ce petit monsieur-là?"

Miss Susan sat and listened like a figure of stone. Her colour changed out of the flush of anger which had lighted it up, and grew again ashy pale. From her labouring breast there came a great gasp, half groan, half sob. She looked at the remorseless creature opposite with a piteous prayer coming into her eyes. First rage, which was useless; then entreaty, more useless still. "Have pity on me! have pity on me," she said.

"But certainly!" said Giovanna, sinking back upon her cushions with a soft laugh. "Certainly! I am not cruel, me; but I am comfortable, and I stay."

"She will not hear of it," said Miss Susan, meeting Everard's anxious looks as she passed him, hurrying upstairs. "Never mind me. Everard, never mind! we

shall do well enough. Do not say any more about it. Never mind! never mind! It is time we were all in bed."

"But, Aunt Susan, tell me——"

"No, no, there is nothing to tell," she said, hurrying from him. "Do not let us say any more about it. It is time we were all in bed."

The next day M. Guillaume left Whiteladies, after a very melancholy parting with his little grandchild. The old man sobbed, and the child sobbed for sympathy. "Thou wilt be good to him, Giovanna!" he said, weeping. Giovanna stood and looked on with a smile on her face. "Bon papa, it is easy to cry," she said; "but you do not want him without a *rente;* weep then for the *rente*, not for the child." "Heartless!" cried the old shopkeeper, turning from her; and her laugh, though it was quite low, did sound heartless to the bystanders; yet there was some truth in what she said. M. Guillaume went away in the morning, and Everard in the afternoon. The young man was deeply perplexed and disturbed. He had been a witness of the conclusive interview on the previous night without hearing all that was said; yet he had heard enough to show him that something lay behind of which he was not

cognisant — something which made Miss Susan unwillingly submit to an encumbrance which she hated, and which made her more deeply, tragically unhappy than a woman of her spotless life and tranquil age had any right to be. To throw such a woman into passionate distress, and make her, so strong in her good sense, so reasonable and thoroughly acquainted with the world, bow her head under an irritating and unnecessary yoke, there must be some cause more potent than anything Everard could divine. He made an attempt to gain her confidence before he went away; but it was still more fruitless than before. The only thing she would say was, that she could speak no more on the subject. "There is nothing to say. She is here now for good or for evil, and we must make the best of it. Probably we shall get on better than we think," said Miss Susan; and that was all he could extract from her. He went away more disturbed than he could tell; his curiosity was excited as well as his sympathy, and though, after a while, his natural reluctance to dwell on painful subjects made him attempt to turn his mind from this, yet the evident mystery to be found out made that attempt more hard than usual. Everard was altogether in a somewhat uncertain and wavering

state of mind at the time. He had returned from his compulsory episode of active life rather better in fortune, and with a perception of his own unoccupied state, which had never disturbed him before. He had not got to love work, which is a thing which requires either genius or training. He honestly believed, indeed, that he hated work, as was natural to a young man of his education; but having been driven to it, and discovered in himself, to his great surprise, some faculty for it, his return to what he thought his natural state had a somewhat strange effect upon him. To do nothing was, no doubt, his natural state. It was freedom; it was happiness (passive); it was the most desirable condition of existence. All this he felt to be true. He was his own master, free to go where he would, do what he would, amuse himself as he liked; and yet the conclusion of the time when he had not been his own master—when he had been obliged to do this and that, to move here and there not by his own will, but as necessity demanded—had left a sense of vacancy in his life. He was dissatisfied with his leisure and his freedom; they were not so good, not so pleasant, as they had once been. He had known storm and tempest, and all the expedients by which men triumph

over these commotions, and the calm of his inland existence wearied him, though he had not yet gone so far as to confess it to himself.

This made him think more of the mystery of Whiteladies than perhaps he would have done otherwise, and moved him so far as to indite a letter to Reine, in which perhaps more motives than that of interest in Miss Susan's troubles were involved. He had left them when the sudden storm which he had now surmounted had appeared on the horizon, at a very critical moment of his intercourse with Reine; and then they had been cast altogether apart, driven into totally different channels for two years. Two years is a long time or a short time, according to the constitution of the mind and the nature of circumstances. It had been about a century to Everard, and he had developed into a different being. And now this different being, brought back to the old life, did not well know what to do with himself. Should he go and join his cousins again, amuse himself, see the world, and perhaps renew some things that were past, and reunite a link half broken, half unmade? Anyhow, he wrote to Reine, setting forth that Aunt Susan was ill and very *queer*,—that there was a visitor at Whiteladies of a very novel and unusual character—that the

dear old house threatened to be turned upside down —fourthly and accidentally, that he had a great mind to spend the next six months on the Continent. Where were they going for the winter? Only ladies, they say, put their chief subject in a postscript. Everard put his under care of a "By-the-bye" in the last two lines of his letter. The difference between the two modes is not very great.

And thus, while the young man meditated change, which is natural to his age, in which renovation and revolution are always possible, the older people at Whiteladies settled down to make the best of it, which is the philosophy of their age. To say the older people is incorrect, for it was Miss Susan only who had anything novel or heavy to endure. Miss Augustine liked the new guest, who for some time went regularly to the Almshouse services with her, and knelt devoutly, and chanted forth the hymns with a full rich voice, which indeed silenced the quavering tones of the old folks, but filled the chapel with such a flood of melody as had never been heard there before. Giovanna enjoyed singing. She had a fine natural voice, but little instruction, and no opportunity at the moment of getting at anything better in the way of music; so that she

was glad of the hymns which gave her pleasure at once in the exercise of her voice, and in the agreeable knowledge that she was making a sensation. As much of a crowd as was possible in St. Austin's began to gather in the Almshouse garden when she was known to be there; and though Mrs. Richard instinctively disapproved of her, the Doctor was somewhat proud of this addition to his service. Giovanna went regularly with her patroness, and gained Augustine's heart, as much as that abstracted heart could be gained, and made herself not unpopular with the poor people, to whom she would speak in her imperfect English with more familiarity than the ladies ever indulged in, and from whom, in lieu of better, she was quite ready to receive compliments about her singing and her beauty. Once, indeed, she sang songs to them in their garden, to the great entertainment of the old Almshouse folks. She was caught in the act by Mrs. Richard, who rushed to the rescue of her gentility with feelings which I will not attempt to describe. The old lady ran out breathless at the termination of a song, with a flush upon her pretty old cheeks, and caught the innovator by the arm.

"The Doctor is at home, and I am just going to

give him a cup of tea," she said; "won't you come and have some with us?"

Mrs. Richard's tidy little bosom heaved under her black silk gown with consternation and dismay.

Giovanna was not at all willing to give up her *al fresco* entertainment. "But I will return, I will return," she said.

"Do, madame, do;" cried the old people, who were vaguely pleased by her music, and more keenly delighted by having a new event to talk about, and the power of wondering what Miss Augustine (poor thing!) would think; and Mrs. Richard led Giovanna in, with her hand upon her arm, fearful lest her prisoner should escape.

"It is very good of you to sing to them; but it is not a thing that is done in England," said the little old lady.

"I love to sing," said Giovanna, "and I shall come often. They have not any one to amuse them; and neither have I," she added with a sigh.

"My dear, you must speak to the Doctor about it," said Mrs. Richard.

Giovanna was glad of any change, even of little Dr. Richard and the cup of tea, so she was submissive enough for the moment; and to see her between these

two excellent and orderly little people was an edifying sight.

"No, it is not usual," said Dr. Richard, "my wife is right; but it is very kind-hearted of madame, my dear, to wish to amuse the poor people. There is nothing to be said against that."

"Very kind-hearted," said Mrs. Richard, though with less enthusiasm. "It is all from those foreigners' love of display," she said in her heart.

"But perhaps it would be wise to consult Miss Augustine, or—any other friend you may have confidence in," said the Doctor. "People are so very censorious, and we must not give any occasion for evil-speaking."

"I think exactly with Dr. Richard, my dear," said the old lady. "I am sure that would be the best."

"But I have nothing done to consult about," cried the culprit surprised. She sipped her tea, and ate a large piece of the good people's cake, however, and let them talk. When she was not crossed, Giovanna was perfectly good-humoured. "I will sing for you, if you please," she said when she had finished.

The Doctor and his wife looked at each other, and professed their delight in the proposal. "But we have no piano," they said in chorus with embarrassed looks.

"What does that do to me, when I can sing without it?" said Giovanna. And she lifted up her powerful voice, "almost too much for a drawing-room," Mrs. Richard said afterwards, and sang them one of those gay peasant songs that abound in Italy, where every village has its own *canzone*. She sang seated where she had been taking her tea, and without seeming to miss an accompaniment, they remarked to each other, as if she had been a ballad-singer. It was pretty enough, but so very unusual! "Of course foreigners cannot be expected to know what is according to the rules of society in England," Mrs. Richard said with conscious indulgence; but she put on her bonnet, and walked with "Madame" part of the way to Whiteladies, that she might not continue her performance in the garden. "Miss Augustine might think, or Miss Susan might think, that we countenanced it; and in the Doctor's position that would never do," said the old lady, breathing her troubles into the ear of a confidential friend whom she met on her way home. And Dr. Richard himself felt the danger not less strongly than she.

Other changes, however, happened to Giovanna as she settled down at Whiteladies. She was without any fixed principles of morality, and had no code of

any kind which interfered with her free action. To give up doing anything she wanted to do because it involved lying, or any kind of spiritual dishonesty, would never have occurred to her, nor was she capable of perceiving that there was anything wrong in securing her own advantage as she had done. But she was by no means all bad, any more than truthful and honourable persons are all good. Her own advantage, or what she thought her own advantage, and her own way, were paramount considerations with her; but having obtained these, Giovanna had no wish to hurt anybody, or to be unkind. She was indolent, and loved ease, but still she was capable of taking trouble now and then to do some one else a service. She had had no moral training, and all her faculties were obtuse; and she had seen no prevailing rule but that of selfishness. Selfishness takes different aspects, according to the manner in which you look at it. When you have to maintain hardly, by a constant struggle, your own self against the encroachments and still more rampant selfishness of others, the struggle confers a certain beauty upon the object of it. Giovanna had wanted to have her own way, like the others of the family, but had been usually thrust into a corner, and prevented from having it. What wonder then, that when

she had a chance, she seized it, and emancipated herself, and secured her own comfort, with the same total disregard to others which she had been used to see? But now, having got this—having for the moment all she wanted—an entire exemption from work, an existence full of external comfort, and circumstances around her which flattered her with the sense of an elevated position—she began to think a little. Nothing was exacted of her. If Miss Susan was not kind to her, she was not at least unkind, only withdrawing from her as much as possible, a thing which Giovanna felt to be quite natural; and in the quiet and silence the young woman's mind began to work. I do not say her conscience, for that was not in the least awakened, nor was she conscious of any penitential regret in thinking of the past, or religious resolution for the future: it was her mind only that was concerned. She thought it might be as well to make certain changes in her habits. In her new existence, certain modifications of the old use and wont seemed reasonable. And then there gradually developed in her—an invaluable possession which sometimes does more for the character than high principle or good intention—a sense of the ludicrous. This was what Everard meant when he said there was fun in her. She had a

sense of humour, a sense of the incongruities which affect some minds so much more powerfully by the fact of being absurd, than by the fact of being wrong. Giovanna, without any actual good motive, thus felt the necessity of amending herself, and making various changes in her life.

This, it may be supposed, took some time to develop; and in the meantime the household in which she had become so very distinct a part, had to make up its mind to her, and resume as best it could its natural habits and use and wont, with the addition of this stranger in the midst. As for the servants, their instinctive repugnance to a foreigner and a new inmate, was lessened from the very first by the introduction of the child, who conciliated the maids, and thus made them forgive his mother the extra rooms they had to arrange, and the extra work necessary. The child was fortunately an engaging and merry child, and as he got used to the strange faces round him, became the delight and pride and amusement of the house. Cook was still head nurse, and derived an increased importance and satisfaction from her supremacy. I doubt if she had ever before felt the dignity and happiness of her position as a married woman half so much as now, when that fact

alone (as the others felt) gave her a mysterious capacity for the management of the child. The maids overlooked the fact that the child's mother, though equally a married woman, was absolutely destitute of this power; but accuracy of reasoning is not necessary in such an argument, and the entire household bowed to the superior endowments of Cook. The child's pattering, sturdy little feet and crowings of baby laughter became the music of Whiteladies, the pleasant accompaniment to which the lives at least of the little community in the kitchen were set. Miss Susan, being miserable, resisted the fascination, and Augustine was too abstract to be sensible of it; but the servants yielded as one woman, and even Stevens succumbed after the feeblest show of resistance. Now and then even, a bell would ring ineffectually in that well-ordered house, and the whole group of attendants be found clustered together worshipping before the baby, who had produced some new word, or made some manifestation of supernatural cleverness; and the sound of the child pervaded all that part of the house in which the servants were supreme. They forgave his mother for being there because she had brought him, and if at the same time they hated her for her neglect of him, the hatred was

kept passive by a perception that, but for this insensibility on her part, the child could not have been allowed thus fully and pleasantly to minister to them.

As for Miss Susan, who had felt as though nothing could make her endure the presence of Giovanna, she too was affected unwittingly by the soft effects of time. It was true that no sentiment, no principle in existence was strong enough to make her accept cheerfully this unwelcome guest. Had she been bidden to do it in order to make atonement for her own guilt, or as penance for that guilt, earning its forgiveness, or out of pity or Christian feeling, she would have pronounced the effort impossible; and impossible she had still thought it when she watched with despair the old shopkeeper's departure, and reflected with a sense of suffering intolerable and not to be borne that he had left behind him this terrible witness against her, this instrument of her punishment. Miss Susan had paced about her room in restless anguish, saying to herself under her breath that her punishment was greater than she could bear. She had felt with a sickening sense of helplessness and hopelessness that she could never go down-stairs again, never take her place at that table, never eat or drink in the company of this new inmate whom she could

not free herself from. And for a few days, indeed, Miss Susan kept on inventing little ailments which kept her in her own room. But this could not last. She had a hundred things to look after which made it necessary for her to be about, to be visible; and gradually there grew upon her a stirring of curiosity to see how things went on, with *that* woman always there. And then she resumed her ordinary habits, came down-stairs, sat down at the familiar table, and by degrees found herself getting accustomed to the new-comer. Strangest effect of those calm monotonous days! Nothing would have made her do it knowingly; but soft pressure of time made her do it. Things quieted down; the alien was there, and there was no possibility of casting her out; and, most wonderful of all, Miss Susan got used to her, in spite of herself.

And Giovanna, for her part, began to think.

CHAPTER XV.

GIOVANNA possessed that quality which is commonly called common sense, though I doubt if she was herself aware of it. She had never before been in a position in which this good sense could tell much, or in which even it was called forth to any purpose. Her lot had always been determined for her by others. She had never, until the coming of the child, been in a position in which it mattered much one way or another what she thought; and since that eventful moment her thinkings had not been of an edifying description. They had been chiefly bent on the consideration how to circumvent the others who were using her for their own purposes, and to work advantage to herself out of the circumstances which, for the first time in her life, gave her the mastery. Now, she had done this; she had triumphantly overcome all difficulties, and, riding over everybody's objections, had established herself here in comfort. Giovanna had expected a con-

stant conflict with Miss Susan, who was her enemy, and over whom she had got the victory. She had looked for nothing better than a daily fight—rather enlivening, all things considered—with the mistress of the house, to whom, she knew, she was so unwelcome a guest. She had anticipated a long-continued struggle, in which she should have to hold her own, and defend herself, hour by hour. When she found that this was not going to be the case—that poor Miss Susan, in her misery and downfall, gave up and disappeared, and, even when she returned again to her ordinary habits, treated herself, Giovanna, with no harshness, and was only silent and cold, not insulting and disagreeable, a great deal of surprise arose in her mind. There were no little vengeances taken upon her, no jibes directed against her, no tasks attempted to be imposed. Miss Augustine, the *bonne sœur*, who no doubt (and this Giovanna could understand) acted from religious motives, was as kind to her as it was in her abstract nature to be, talking to her on subjects which the young woman did not understand, but to which she assented easily, to please the other, about the salvation of the race, and how, if anything happened to Herbert, there might be a great work possible to his successor; but even Miss Susan, who

was her adversary, was not unkind to her, only cold, and this, Giovanna, accustomed to much rough usage, was not refined enough to take much note of. This gave a strong additional force to her conviction that it would be worth while to put herself more in accord with her position; and I believe that Giovanna, too, felt instinctively the influence of the higher breeding of her present companions. The first result of her cogitations became evident one winter day, when all was dreary out of doors, and Miss Susan, after having avoided as long as she could the place in which Giovanna was, felt herself at last compelled to take refuge in the drawing-room. There she found, to her great amazement, the young woman seated on the rug before the fire, playing with the child, who, seated on her lap, seemed as perfectly at home there as on the ample lap of its beloved Cook. Miss Susan started visibly at this unaccustomed sight, but said nothing. It was not her custom, now, to say anything she could help saying. She drew her chair aside to be out of their way, and took up her book. This was another notable change in her habits. She had been used to work, knitting the silent hours away, and read only at set times, set apart for this purpose by the habit of years

—and then always what she called "standard books." Now, Miss Susan, though her knitting was always at hand, knitted scarcely at all, but read continually novels, and all the light literature of the circulating library. She was scarcely herself aware of this change. It is a sign of the state of mind in which we have too much to think of, as well as of that in which we have nothing to think of at all.

And I think if any stranger had seen that pretty group, the beautiful young mother cooing over the child, playing with it and caressing it, the child responding by all manner of baby tricks and laughter, and soft clingings and claspings, while the elder woman sat silent and grey, taking no notice of them ; he would have set the elder woman down as the severest of grandmothers — the father's mother, no doubt, emblem of the genus mother-in-law, which so many clever persons have held up to odium. To tell the truth, Miss Susan had some difficulty in going on with her reading, with the sound of those baby babblings in her ear. She was thunderstruck at first by the scene, and then felt unreasonably angry. Was nature nothing then? She had thought the child's dislike of Giovanna—though it was painful to see—was appropriate to the circumstances, and had

in it a species of poetic justice. Had it been but a pretence, or what did this sudden fondness mean? She kept silent as long as she could, but after a time the continual babble grew too much for her.

"You have grown very suddenly fond of the child, Madame Jean," she said abruptly.

"Fond!" said Giovanna, "that is a strange word, that English word of yours; I can make him love me—here."

"You did not love him elsewhere, so far as I have heard," said Miss Susan, "and that is the best way to gain love."

"Madame Suzanne, I wish to speak to you," said Giovanna. "At Bruges I was never of any account; they said the child was more gentil, more sage with Gertrude. Well, it might be he was; they said I knew nothing about children, that I could not learn—that it was not in my nature; things which were pleasant, which were re-assuring, don't you think? That was one of the reasons why I came away."

"You did not show much power of managing him, it must be confessed, when you came here."

"No," said Giovanna, "it was harder than I thought. These babies, they have no reason. When you say, 'Be still, I am thy mother, be still!' it does not touch

them. What they like is kisses and cakes, and that you should make what in England is called 'a fuss;' that is the hardest, making a fuss; but when it is done, all is done. Voilà! Now, he loves me. If Gertrude approached, he would run to me and cry. Ah, that would make me happy!"

"Then it is to spite Gertrude"—Miss Susan began, in her severest voice.

"No, no; I only contemplate that as a pleasure, a pleasure to come. No; I am not very fond of to read, like you, Madame Suzanne; besides, there is not anything more to read; and so I reflect. I reflect with myself, that not to have love with one's child, or at least amitié, is very strange. It is droll; it gives to think; and people will stare and say, 'Is that *her* child?' This is what I reflect within myself. To try before would have been without use, for always there was Gertrude, or my belle-mère, or some one. They cried out, 'G'vanna, touch it not, thou wilt injure the baby!' 'G'vanna, give it to me, thou knowest nothing of children!' And when I came away it was more hard than I thought. Babies have not sense to know when it is their mother. I said to myself, 'Here is a perverse one, who hates me like the rest,' and I was angry. I

beat him,—you would have beat him also, Madame Suzanne, if he had screamed when you touched him. And then—petit drôle !—he screamed more."

"Very natural," said Miss Susan. "If you had any heart, you would not beat a baby like that."

Giovanna's eyes flashed. She lifted her hand quickly, as if to give a blow of recollection now; but, changing her mind, she caught the child up in her arms, and laid his little flushed cheek to hers. "A présent, tu m'aimes!" she said. "When I saw how the others did, I knew I could do it too. Also, Madame Suzanne, I recollected that a mother should have de l'amitié for her child."

Miss Susan gave a short contemptuous laugh. "It is a fine thing to have found that out at last," she said.

"And I have reflected further," said Giovanna—"Yes, darling, thou shalt have these jolies choses;" and with this, she took calmly from the table one of a very finely-carved set of chessmen, Indian work, which ornamented it. Miss Susan started, and put out her hand to save the ivory knight, but the little fellow had already grasped it, and a sudden scream arose.

"For shame! Madame Suzanne," cried Giovanna, with fun sparkling in her eyes. "You, too, then, have no heart!"

"This is totally different from kindness; this is spoiling the child," cried Miss Susan. "My ivory chessmen, which were my mother's! Take it away from him at once."

Giovanna wavered a moment between fun and prudence, then coaxing the child with something else less valuable, got the knight from him, and replaced it on the table. Then she resumed where she had broken off. "I have reflected further, that it is bad to fight in a house. You take me for your enemy, Madame Suzanne? —eh bien, I am not your enemy. I do nothing against you. I seek what is good for me, as all do."

"All don't do it at the cost of other people's comfort —at the cost of everything that is worth caring for in another's life."

This Miss Susan said low, with her eyes bent on the fire, to herself rather than to Giovanna; from whom, indeed, she expected no response.

"Mon Dieu! it is not like that," cried the young woman; "what is it that I do to you? Nothing! I do not trouble, nor tease, nor ask for anything. I am contented with what you give me. I have come here, and I find it well; but you, what is it that I do to you? I do not interfere. It is but to see me one time in a

day, two times, perhaps. Listen, it cannot be so bad for you to see me even two times in a day as it would be for me to go back to my belle-mère."

"But you have no right to be here," said Miss Susan, shaking her grey dress free from the baby's grasp, who had rolled softly off the young woman's knee, and now sat on the carpet between them. His little babble went on all through their talk. The plaything Giovanna had given him—a paperknife of carved ivory—was a delightful weapon to the child; he struck the floor with it, which under no possibility could be supposed capable of motion, and then the legs of the chair on which Miss Susan sat, which afforded a more likely steed. Miss Susan had hard ado to pull her skirts from the soft round baby fingers, as the child looked up at her with great eyes, which laughed in her angry face. It was all she could do to keep her heart from melting to him; but then, *that* woman! who looked at her with eyes which were not angry, nor disagreeable, wooing her to smile—which not for the world, and all it contained, would she do.

"Always I have seen that one does what one can for one's self," said Giovanna; "shall I think of you first, instead of myself? But no! is there any in the world

who does that? But, no! it is contrary to reason. I do my best for *me;* and then I reflect; now that I am well off, I will hurt no one. I will be friends if Madame Suzanne will. I wish not to trouble her. I will show de l'amitié for her as well as for le petit. Thus it should be when we live in one house."

Giovanna spoke with a certain earnestness as of honest conviction. She had no sense of irony in her mind; but Miss Susan had a deep sense of irony, and felt herself insulted when she was thus addressed by the intruder who had found her way into her house, and made havoc of her life. She got up hastily to her feet, overturning the child, who had now seated himself on her dress, and for whom this hasty movement had all the effect of an earthquake. She did not even notice this, however, and paid no attention to his cries, but fell to walking about the room in a state of impatience and excitement which would not be kept under.

"You do well to teach me what people should do who live in one house!" cried Miss Susan. "It comes gracefully from you who have forced yourself into my house against my will—who are a burden, and insupportable to me—you and your child. Take him away, or you will drive me mad! I cannot hear myself speak."

"Hush, mon ange," said Giovanna; "hush, here is something else that is pretty for thee—hush! and do not make the bonne maman angry. Ah, pardon, Madame Suzanne, you are not the bonne maman—but you look almost like her when you look like that!"

"You are very impertinent," said Miss Susan, flushing high; for to compare her to Madame Austin of Bruges was more than she could bear.

"That is still more like her!" said Giovanna; "the belle-mère often tells me I am impertinent. Can I help it then? if I say what I think, that cannot be wrong. But you are not really like the bonne maman, Madame Suzanne," she added, subduing the malice in her eyes. "You hate me, but you do not try to make me unhappy. You give me everything I want. You do not grudge. You do not make me work. Ah, what a life she would have made to one who came like me!"

This silenced Miss Susan, in spite of herself; for she herself felt and knew that she was not at all kind to Giovanna, and she was quite unaware that Giovanna was inaccessible to those unkindnesses which more refined natures feel, and having the substantial advantages of her reception at Whiteladies undisturbed by

any practical hardship, had no further requirements in a sentimental sort. Miss Susan felt that she was not kind, but Giovanna did not feel it; and as the elder woman could not understand the bluntness of feeling in the younger, which produced this toleration, she was obliged, against her will, to see in it some indication of a higher nature. She thought reluctantly, and for the moment, that the woman, whom she loathed, was better than herself. She came back to the chair as this thought forced itself upon her, and sat down there and fixed her eyes upon the intruder, who still held her place on the carpet at her feet.

"Why do not you go away?" she said, tempted once more to make a last effort for her own relief. "If you think it good of me to receive you as I do, why will you not listen to my entreaties, and go away? I will give you enough to live on: I will not grudge money; but I cannot bear the sight of you, you know that. It brings my sin, my great sin, to my mind. I repent it; but I cannot undo it," cried Miss Susan. "Oh, God forgive me! But you, Giovanna, listen! You have done wrong, too, as well as I—but it has been for your benefit, not for your punishment. You should not have done it, any more than me."

"Madame Suzanne," said Giovanna, "one must think of one's self first; what you call sin does not trouble me. I did not begin it. I did what I was told. If it is wrong, it is for the belle-mère and you, I am safe; and I must think of myself. It pleases me to be here, and I have my plans. But I should like to show de l'amitié for you, Madame Suzanne — when I have thought first of myself."

"But it will be no better for yourself, staying here," cried Miss Susan, subduing herself forcibly. "I will give you money — you shall live where you please——"

"Pardon," said Giovanna, with a smile; "it is to me to know. I have mes idées à moi. You all think of yourselves first. I will be good friends if you will; but, first of all, there is *me*."

"And the child?" said Miss Susan, with strange forgetfulness, and a bizarre recollection, in her despair, of the conventional self-devotion to be expected from a mother.

"The child, bah! probably what will be for my advantage will be also for his; but you do not think, Madame Suzanne," said Giovanna, with a laugh, regarding her closely with a look which but for its perfect

good-humour would have been sarcastic, "that I will sacrifice myself, me, for the child?"

"Then why should you make a pretence of loving him? loving him! if you are capable of love!" cried Miss Susan, in dismay.

Giovanna laughed. She took the little fellow up in her arms, and put his little rosy cheek against the fair oval of her own. "Tu m'aimes à présent," she said; "that is as it ought to be. One cannot have a baby and not have de l'amitié for him; but, naturally, first of all I will think of myself."

"It is all pretence, then, your love," cried Miss Susan, once more starting up wildly, with a sense that the talk, and the sight of her, and the situation altogether, were intolerable. "Oh, it is like you foreigners! You pretend to love the child because it is comme il faut. You want to be friendly with me because it is comme il faut. And you expect me, an honest Englishwoman, to accept this? Oh!" she cried, hiding her face in her hands, with a pang of recollection, "I was that at least before I knew you!"

Curious perversity of nature! For the moment Miss Susan felt bitterly that the loss of her honesty and her innocence was Giovanna's fault. The young woman

laughed, in spite of herself, and it was not wonderful that she did so. She got up for the first time from the carpet, raising the child to her shoulder. But she wanted to conciliate, not to offend; and suppressed the inappropriate laughter. She went up to where Miss Susan had placed herself—thrown back in a great chair, with her face covered by her hands—and touched her arm softly, not without a certain respect for her trouble.

"I do not pretend," she said; "because it is comme il faut? but, yes, that is all natural. Yet I do not pretend. I wish to show de l'amitié for Madame Suzanne. I will not give up my ideas, nor do what you will, instead of that which I will; but to be good friends, that is what I desire. Bébé is satisfied—he asks no more—he demands not the sacrifice. Why not Madame Suzanne too?"

"Go away, go away, please," cried Miss Susan faintly. She was not capable of anything more.

Giovanna shrugged her handsome shoulders, and gave an appealing look round her, as if to some unseen audience. She felt that nothing but native English stupidity could fail to see her good sense and honest meaning. Then, perceiving further argument to be hopeless, she turned away, with the child still on her shoulder, and ere

she had reached the end of the passage, began to sing to him with her sweet rich untutored voice. The voice receded, carolling through all the echoes of the old house like a bird, floating up the great oaken staircase, and away to the extremity of the long corridor, where her room was. She was perfectly light-hearted and easy-minded in the resolution to do the best for herself; and she was perfectly aware that the further scheme she had concocted for her own benefit would be still more displeasing to the present mistress of the house. She did not care for that the least in the world; but, honestly, she was well-disposed towards Miss Susan, and not only willing, but almost anxious, so far as anxiety was possible to her, to establish a state of affairs in which they might be good friends.

But to Miss Susan it was absolutely impossible to conceive that things so incompatible could yet exist together. Perhaps she was dimly aware of the incongruities in her own mind, the sense of guilt and the sense of innocence which existed there, in opposition, yet, somehow, in that strange concord which welds the contradictions of the human soul into one, despite of all incongruity; but to realise or believe in the strange mixture in Giovanna's mind was quite impossible to

her. She sat still with her face covered until she was quite sure the young woman and her child had gone, listening, indeed, to the voice which went so lightly and sweetly through the passages. How could she sing—that woman! whom if she had never seen, Susan Austin would still have been an honest woman, able to look everybody in the face! Miss Susan knew—no one better—how utterly foolish and false it was to say this; she knew that Giovanna was but the instrument, not the originator, of her own guilt; but, notwithstanding the idea having once occurred to her, that had she never seen Giovanna, she would never have been guilty, she hugged it to her bosom with an insane satisfaction, feeling as if, for the moment, it was a relief. Oh that she had never seen her! How blameless she had been before that unhappy meeting! how free of all weight upon her conscience! and now, how burdened, how miserable, how despotic that conscience was! and her good name dependent upon the discretion of this creature, without discretion, without feeling, this false, bold foreigner, this intruder, who had thrust her way into a quiet house, to destroy its peace! When she was quite sure that Giovanna was out of the way, Miss Susan went to her own room, and

looked piteously at her own worn face in the glass. Did that face tell the same secrets to others as it did to herself? she wondered. She had never been a vain woman, even in her youth, though she had been comely enough, if not pretty; but now, a stranger, who did not know Miss Susan, might have thought her vain. She looked at herself so often in the glass, pitifully studying her looks, to see what could be read in them. It had come to be one of the habits of her life.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE winter passed slowly, as winters do, especially in the silence of the country, where little happens to mark their course. The autumnal fall of leaves lasted long, but at length cleared off with the fogs and damps of November, leaving the lawn and the Priory Lane outside free from the faded garments of the limes and beeches. Slowly, slowly the earth turned to the deepest dark of winter, and turned back again imperceptibly towards the sun. The rich brown fields turned up their furrows to the darkening damp and whitening frost, and lay still, resting from their labours, waiting for the germs to come. The trees stood out bare against the sky, betraying every knob and twist upon their branches; big lumps of gray mistletoe hung in the apple-trees that bordered Priory Lane; and here and there a branch of Lombardy poplar, still clothed with a few leaves, turning their white lining outwards, threw itself up against the blue sky like a flower. The

Austin Chantry was getting nearly finished, all the external work having been done some time ago. It was hoped that the ornamentation within would be completed in time for Christmas, when the chaplain, who was likewise to be the curate, and save (though Mr. Gerard mentioned this to no one) sixty pounds a year to the vicar, was to begin the daily service. This chaplain was a nephew of Dr. Richard's, a good young man of very High Church views, who was very ready to pray for the souls of the Austin family without once thinking of the rubrics. Mr. Gerard did not care for a man of such pronounced opinions; and good little Dr. Richard, even after family feeling had led him to recommend his nephew, was seized with many pangs as to the young Ritualist's effect upon the parish.

"He will do what Miss Augustine wants, which is what I never would have done," said the warden of the Almshouses. "He thinks he is a better Churchman than I am, poor fellow! but he is very careless of the Church's directions, my dear; and if you don't attend to the rubrics, where are you to find rest in this world? But he thinks he is a better Churchman than I."

"Yes, my dear, the rubrics have always been your great standard," said the good wife; but as the Rev.

Mr. Wrook was related to them by her side, she was reluctant to say anything more.

Thus, however, it was with a careful and somewhat anxious brow that Dr. Richard awaited the young man's arrival. He saved Mr. Gerard the best part of a curate's salary, as I have said. Miss Augustine endowed the Chantry with an income of sixty pounds a year; and with twenty or thirty pounds added to that, who could object to such a salary for a curacy in a country place? The vicar's purse was the better for it, if not himself; and he thought it likely that by careful processes of disapproval any young man in course of time might be put down. The Chantry was to be opened at Christmas; and I think (if it had ever occurred to her) that Miss Augustine might then have been content to sing her *Nunc Dimittis;* but it never did occur to her, her life being very full, and all her hours occupied. She looked forward, however, to the time when two sets of prayers should be said every day for the Austins with unbounded expectation. Up to the middle of November, I think, she almost hoped (in an abstract way, meaning no harm to her nephew) that something might still happen to Herbert; for Giovanna, who went with her to the Almshouse service

every morning to please her, seemed endowed with heavenly dispositions, and ready to train up her boy—who was a ready-made child, so to speak, and not uncertain, as any baby must be who has to be born to parents not yet so much as acquainted with each other—to make the necessary sacrifice, and restore Whiteladies to the Church. This hope failed a little after November, because then Giovanna tired of her devotions, and went to the early service no longer; though even then Miss Augustine felt that little Jean (now called Johnny) was within her own power, and could be trained in the way in which he should go; but anyhow, howsoever it was to be accomplished, no doubt the double prayers for the race would accomplish much, and something of the sweetness of an end attained stole into Augustine's heart.

The parish and the neighbourhood also took a great interest in the Chantry. Such of the neighbours as thought Miss Augustine mad, awaited, with a mixture of amusement and anxiety, the opening of this new chapel, which was said to be unlike anything seen before—a miracle of ecclesiastical eccentricity; while those who thought her papistical looked forward with equal interest to a chance of polemics and excite-

ment, deploring the introduction of Ritualism into a quiet corner of the country, hitherto free of that pest, but enjoying unawares the agreeable stimulant of local schism and ecclesiastical strife. The taste for this is so universal that I suppose it must be an instinct of human nature, as strong among the non-fighting portion of the creation as actual combat is to the warlike. I need not say that the foundress of the Chantry had no such thoughts; her object was simple enough; but it was too simple—too one-fold (if I may borrow an expressive word from my native tongue: ae-fauld we write it in Scotch) for the apprehension of ordinary persons, who never believe in unity of motive. Most people thought she was artfully bent on introducing the confessional and all the other bugbears of Protestantism; but she meant nothing of the kind: she only wanted to open another agency in heaven on behalf of the Austins, and nothing else affected her mind so long as this was secured.

The Chantry, however, afforded a very reasonable excuse to Kate and Sophy Farrel-Austin for paying a visit to Whiteladies, concerning which they had heard some curious rumours. Their interest in the place no doubt had considerably died out of late, since Her-

bert's amendment in health had been proved beyond doubt. Their father had borne that blow without much sympathy from his children, though they had not hesitated, as the reader is aware, to express their own sense that it was "a swindle" and "a sell," and that Herbert had no right to get better. The downfall to Farrel-Austin himself had been a terrible one, and the foolish levity of his children about it had provoked him often, almost past bearing; but time had driven him into silence, and into an appearance at least of forgetting his disappointment. On the whole he had no very deadly reason for disappointment: he was very well off without Whiteladies, and had he got Whiteladies he had no son to succeed him, and less and less likelihood of ever having one. But I believe it is the man who has much who always feels most deeply when he is hindered from having more. The charm of adding field to field is, I suppose, a more keen and practical hunger than that of acquiring a little is to him who has nothing. Poverty does not know the sweetness that eludes it altogether, but Property is fully aware of the keen delight of possession. The disappointment sunk deep into Farrel-Austin's heart. It even made him feel like the victim of retributive justice, as if,

had he but kept his word to Augustine, Herbert might have been killed for him, and all been well; whereas now Providence preserved Herbert to spite him, and keep the inheritance from him! It seemed an unwarrantable bolstering up, on the part of Heaven and the doctors, of a miserable life which could be of very little good either to its owner or any other; and Farrel-Austin grew morose and disagreeable at home, by way of avenging himself on some one. Kate and Sophy did not very much care: they were too independent to be under his power, as daughters at home so often are under the power of a morose father. They had emancipated themselves beforehand, and now were strong in the fortresses of habit and established custom, and those natural defences with which they were powerfully provided. Rumours had reached them of a new inmate at Whiteladies, a young woman with a child, said to be the heir, who very much attracted their curiosity; and they had every intention of being kind to Herbert and Reine when they came home, and of making fast friends with their cousins. "For why should families be divided?" Kate said, not without sentiment. "However disappointed we may be, we can't quarrel with Herbert for getting well, can we, and keeping his own

property?" The heroes who assembled at afternoon tea grinned under their moustachios, and said "No." These were not the heroes of two years ago: Dropmore was married among his own "set," and Ffarington had sold out and gone down to his estates in Wales, and Lord Alf had been ruined by a succession of misfortunes on the turf, so that there was quite a new party at the Hatch, though the life was very much the same as before. Drags and dinners, and boatings and races and cricket-matches, varied, when winter came on, and according to the seasons, by hunting, skating, dancing, and every other amusement procurable, went on like clock-work, like treadmill-work, or anything else that is useless and monotonous. Kate Farrel-Austin, who was now twenty-three in years, felt a hundred and three in life. She had grown wise, the usual (and horrible) conclusion of girls of her sort. She wanted to marry, and change the air and scene of her existence, which began to grow tired of her as she of it. Sophy, on her way to the same state of superannuation, rather wished it too. "One of us ought certainly to do something," she said, assenting to Kate's homilies on the subject. They were not fools, though they were rather objectionable young women; and they felt that such life as theirs

comes to be untenable after a while. To be sure the young men of their kind, the successors of Dropmore, &c. (I cannot really take the trouble to put down these young gentlemen's names), did carry on for a very long time the same kind of existence; but they went and came, were at London sometimes and sometimes in the country, and had a certain something which they called duty to give lines, as it were, to their life; while to be always there, awaiting the return of each succeeding set of men, was the fate of the girls. The male creatures here as in most things had the advantage of the others; except that perhaps in their consciousness of the tedium of their noisy monotonous lot, the girls, had they been capable of it, had a better chance of getting weary and turning to better things.

The Austin Chantry furnished the Farrel-Austins with the excuse they wanted to investigate Whiteladies and its mysterious guest. They drove over on a December day, when it was nearly finished, and by right of their relationship obtained entrance and full opportunity of inspection; and not only so, but met Miss Augustine there, with whom they returned to Whiteladies. There was not very much intercourse possible between the recluse and these two lively young ladies, but they

accompanied her notwithstanding, plying her with mocking questions, and "drawing her out;" for the Farrel-Austins were of those who held the opinion that Miss Augustine was mad, and a fair subject of ridicule. They got her to tell them about her pious purposes, and laid them up, with many a mischievous glance at each other, for the entertainment of their friends. When Stevens showed them in, announcing them with a peculiar loudness of tone intended to show his warm sense of the family hostility, there was no one in the drawing-room but Giovanna, who sat reclining in one of the great chairs, lazily watching the little boy who trotted about her, and who had now assumed the natural demeanour of a child to a mother. She was not a caressing mother even now, and in his heart I do not doubt Johnny still preferred Cook; but they made a pretty group, the rosy little fellow in his velvet frock and snow-white pinafore, and Giovanna in a black dress of the same material, which gave a most appropriate setting to her beauty. Dear reader, let me not deceive you, or give you false ideas of Miss Susan's liberality, or Giovanna's extravagance. The velvet was velveteen, of which we all make our winter gowns, not the more costly material which lasts you (or lasted your mother,

shall we say?) twenty years as a dinner-dress, and costs you twice as many pounds as years. The Farrel-Austins were pretty girls both, but they were not of the higher order of beauty, like Giovanna; and they were much impressed by her looks and the indolent grace of her attitude, and the easy at-home air with which she held possession of Miss Susan's drawing-room. She scarcely stirred when they came in, for her breeding, as may be supposed, was still very imperfect, and probably her silence prolonged their respect for her more than conversation would have done; but the child, whom the visitors knew how to make use of as a medium of communication, soon produced a certain acquaintance. "Je suis Johnny," the baby said in answer to their question. In his little language one tongue and another was much the same; but in the drawing-room the mode of communication differed from that in the kitchen, and the child acknowledged the equality of the two languages by mixing them. "But mamma say Yan," he added as an after-thought.

The two girls looked at each other. Here was the mysterious guest evidently before them: to find her out, her ways, her meaning, and how she contemplated her position, could not be difficult. Kate was as usual a

reasonable creature, talking as other people talk; while Sophy was the madcap, saying things she ought not to say, whose luck it was not unfrequently to surprise other people into similar indiscretions.

"Then this charming little fellow is yours?" said Kate. "How nice for the old ladies to have a child in the house! Gentlemen don't always care for the trouble, but where there are only ladies it is so cheerful; and how clever he is to speak both English and French!"

Giovanna laughed softly. The idea that it was cheerful to have a child in the house amused her, but she kept her own counsel. "They teach him — a few words," she said, making the w more of a v, and rolling the r a great deal more than she did usually, so that this sounded like *vorruds*, and proved to the girls, who had come to make an examination of her, that she knew very little English and spoke it very badly, as they afterwards said.

"Then you are come from abroad? Pray don't think us impertinent. We are cousins; Farrel-Austins; you may have heard of us."

"Yes, yes, I have heard of you," said Giovanna with a smile. She had never changed her indolent position, and it gave her a certain pleasure to feel her-

self so far superior to her visitors, though in her heart she was afraid of them, and afraid of being exposed alone to their scrutiny.

Kate looked at her sister, feeling that the stranger had the advantage, but Sophy broke in with an answering laugh.

"It has not been anything very pleasant you have heard; we can see that; but we ain't so bad as the old ladies think us," said Sophy. "We are nice enough; Kate is sensible, though I am silly; we are not so bad as they think us here."

"I heard of you from my beau-père at Bruges," said Giovanna. "Jeanot! 'faut pas gêner la belle dame."

"Oh, I like him," said Kate. "Then you *are* from abroad? You are one of the Austins of Bruges? we are your cousins too. I hope you like England, and Whiteladies. Is it not a charming old house?"

Giovanna made no reply. She smiled, which might have been assent or contempt; it was difficult to say which. She had no intention of betraying herself. Whatever these young women might be, nothing could put them on her side of the question: this she perceived by instinct, and heroically refrained from all self-committal. The child by this time had gone to Sophy,

and stood by her knee, allowing himself to be petted and caressed.

"Oh, what a dear little thing! what a nasty little thing!" said Sophy. "If papa saw him he would like to murder him, and so should I. I suppose he is the heir?"

"But M. Herbert lives, and goes to get well," said Giovanna.

"Yes, what a shame it is! Quel dommage, as you say in French. What right has he to get well, after putting it into everybody's head that he was going to die? I declare I have no patience with such hypocrisy! People should do one thing or another," said Sophy, "not pretend for years that they are dying, and then live."

"Sophy, don't say such things. She is the silliest rattle, and says whatever comes into her head. To be kept in suspense used to be very trying for poor papa," said Kate. "He does not believe still that Herbert can live; and now that it has gone out of papa's hands, it must be rather trying for you."

"I am not angry with M. Herbert because he gets well," said Giovanna with a smile. She was amused indeed by the idea, and her amusement had done more

to dissipate her resentment than reason; for to be sure it was somewhat ludicrous that Herbert should be found fault with for getting well. "When I am sick," she went on, "I try to get better too."

"Well, I think it is a shame," said Sophy. "He ought to think of other people waiting and waiting, and never knowing what is going to happen. Oh! Miss Susan, how do you do? We came to ask for you, and when Herbert and Reine were expected home."

Miss Susan came in prepared for the examination she had to go through. Her aspect was cloudy, as it always was nowadays. She had not the assured air of dignified supremacy and proprietorship which she once had possessed; but the Farrel-Austins were not penetrating enough to perceive more than that she looked dull, which was what they scarcely expected. She gave a glance at Giovanna, still reclining indolently in her easy chair; and curiously enough, quite against her expectation, without warning or reason, Miss Susan felt herself moved by something like a thrill of pleasure! What did it mean? It meant that Farrel's girls, whom she disliked, who were her natural enemies, were not fit to be named in comparison with this young woman who was her torment, her punishment, her bad angel; but at

all events hers, on her side, pitted with her against them. It was not an elevated sort of satisfaction, but such as it was it surprised her with a strange gleam of pleasure. She sat down near Giovanna, unconsciously ranging herself on that side against the other; and then she relapsed into common life, and gave her visitors a very circumstantial account of Herbert and Reine—how they had wished to come home at Christmas, but the doctors thought it more prudent to wait till May. Kate and Sophy listened eagerly, consulting each other, and comparing notes in frequent looks.

"Yes, poor fellow! of course May will be better," said Kate, "though *I* should have said June myself. It is sometimes very cold in May. Of course he will always be *very* delicate; his constitution must be so shattered——"

"His constitution is not shattered at all," said Miss Susan, irritated, as the friends of a convalescent so often are, by doubts of his strength. "Shattered constitutions come from quite different causes, Miss Kate—from what you call 'fast' living and wickedness. Herbert has the constitution of a child; he has no enemy but cold, and I hope we can take care of him here."

"Oh, Kate meant no harm," said Sophy; "we know

he could never have been 'fast.' It is easy to keep straight when you haven't health for anything else," said this too well-informed young woman.

"Hush!" said her sister in an audible whisper, catching hold of the baby to make a diversion. Then Kate aimed her little broadside too.

"We have been so pleased to make acquaintance with madame," she said, using that title without any name, as badly-instructed people are so apt to do. "It must be nice for you to feel yourself provided whatever happens. This, I hear, is the little heir?"

"Madame Suzanne," interrupted Giovanna, "I have told ces dames that I am glad M. Herbert goes to get well. I hope he will live long and be happy. Jean, chéri! dis fort 'Vive M. Herbert!' as I taught you, that ces dames may hear."

Johnny was armed with his usual weapon, the paper-knife, which on ordinary occasions Miss Susan could not endure to see in his hand; for I need not say it was her own pet weapon, which Giovanna in her ignorance had appropriated. He made a great flourish in the air with this falchion. "Vive M'sieu 'Erbert!" cried the child, his little round face flushed and shining with natural delight in his achievement. Giovanna

snatched him up on her lap to kiss and applaud him, and Miss Susan, with a start of wonder, felt tears of pleasure come to her eyes. It was scarcely credible even to herself.

"Yes, he is the heir," she said quickly, looking her assailants in the face, "that is, if Herbert has no children of his own. I am fortunate, as you say—more fortunate than your papa, Miss Kate."

"Who has only girls," said Sophy, coming to the rescue. "Poor papa! Though if we are not as good as the men, we must be poor creatures," she added with a laugh; and this was a proposition which nobody attempted to deny.

As for Kate, she addressed her sister very seriously when they left Whiteladies. Things were come to a pass in which active measures were necessary, and a thorough comprehension of the situation.

"If you don't make up your mind at once to marry Herbert, that woman will," she said to Sophy. "We shall see before six months are out. You don't mind my advice as you ought, but you had better this time. I'd rather marry him myself than let him drop into the hands of an adventuress like that."

"Do! I sha'n't interfere," said Sophy lightly; but in

her heart she allowed that Kate was right. If one of them was to have Whiteladies, it would be necessary to be alert and vigorous. Giovanna was not an antagonist to be despised. They did not undervalue her beauty: women seldom do, whatever fancy-painters on the other side may say.

Miss Susan, for her part, left the drawing-room along with them, with so curious a sensation going through her that she had to retire to her room to get the better of it. She felt a certain thrill of gratefulness, satisfaction, kindness in the midst of her hatred; and yet the hatred was not diminished. This put all her nerves on edge like a jarring chord.

END OF VOL. II.

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